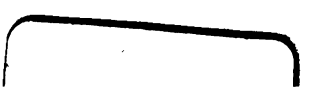
LOVE, the HARVESTER

by MAX PEMBERTON



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Love, the Harvester

"He held her hand in his own for a little while"

Love, the Harvester

Being a Story of the Gleaners in the Winter of the Year, and of those that went a Hunting in the Days when George the Third was King

By

Max Pemberton

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

By Frank Dadd, R. I.

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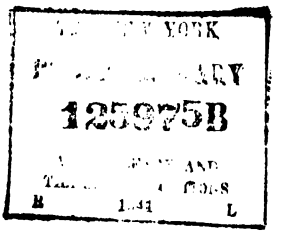

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Chapter I

Wherein the Reader is introduced to Mistress Nancy Dene, of Belton, and to the Green Chaise which came upon the King's Business

QUICK, the groom, helped his mistress to the saddle with a sure and willing hand, and ventured to tell her that it was a fine day.

"Truth, mistress," said he, "the Lord is kind to them that go hunting. Was ever such a day for hounds seen or read on? Ecod, it makes a man of me, a man it do. And I be forty-two come Martinmas."

Mistress Nancy gathered up the reins in her hand, and touched the willing chestnut, Slim, caressingly with her whip. Behind her was the Abbey, her home. Before her lay the park, brown and leafless, with still pools and winding paths and many a wood for the nightingale's note. It was hers, all

hers, to-day. To-morrow, another might come there, a new master be found, a discordant voice be heard. But to-day she was mistress still. And she was going a-hunting. The sun shone on no prettier thing in all England than the mistress of Belton. The whole county would say so presently; even Jack Danvers would admit it — and Jack was a misogynist.

"You will never be a man, Quick," she said laughingly; "why, that's what I have just said to Aunt Jacintha. She will never be a man either! Here I am, twenty-four years old yesterday, with all the cares of a kingdom about my little shoulders. Let the curb out another link, Quick. We are going to ride fast to-day."

Quick let out the curb slowly, and nodded his head at the retort.

"Ay, you do say some sharpish things, mistress, to that poor old lady sometimes. Ecod, I was telling them at 'The Feathers' yesternight, I was. 'The young mistress,' says I, 'why, what does the passun tell about a-pouring out scorpions — and the very genteelest scorpions as ever come out

of a mug?' says I. There, that will do, lady, for the scent 's sure — ay, as sure as the sight I saw upon this very road not an hour gone."

Mistress Nancy had turned the willing chestnut to ride out of the southern gate of the park — for the old groom's chatter was as much a part of her life as the very trees and towers of her domain; but now she reined in an instant to ask a question.

"Who passed upon the road, Quick?"

Quick, himself upon a well-made brown horse, chewed the cud of the indispensable straw, and shook his head sagely.

"Ay, who passed upon the road, and where be they a-goin' to? Answer that question, mistress. Not a-hunting, to be sure. Folks don't go a-hunting in an old green chaise with a broken wheel. There's no need of learning to tell me that. Ecod, if ever I see the likes of 'em for a pair of wheezing rogues in all the country. They be after no good, I'ze warrant, miss. 'T is Mr. Jack that we must ask for news of they."

Mistress Nancy, who had laughed at the

little fellow's odd expression, now became serious and very much interested.

"What sort of men were they, Quick?"

"Why, no sort of men, miss, no sort at all. The gentleman, says I, he goes in his coach; the farmer he's across a good horse. But a green chaise and a leather wallet — the Lord be good to me if ever an honest man rode in such company. Ay, and civility, too, and good in the argument. 'For what says the Scriptures?' asks one. And the other — him that wore the bottle-green coat — he's off with it directly. 'Do good to your neighbours — whereby,' says he, 'sustenance in mind and body, and good old English ale clearly are intended.' 'Ay, ay,' says I; 'good that's done to your neighbour that way is the true religion, gentlemen. Your servant, sirs; show me your road, and I tell you the way; or call for another mug, and I'll be for comparisons.' Which set them off, miss. And the young fellow he asks it plain — the house of one Jack Danvers, that lives in these parts; 'do you know that, my man?' he asks.

'Why, the very house,' says I; 'not more than five mile from this very inn, and you could not have been in better luck. Ay, there 's a gentleman for you, that Master Jack,' says I, 'who jumped his horse but three weeks ago over the passun's nose as he was going to the very pulpit. A rider, gentlemen, a rider; and better port wine in his cellars than you 'll drink at "The White Horse" in London. I wish you good morning, sirs,' says I, 'and when next you 're this way in that same green chaise, I hope you'll be so kind as to let me see the old horse again; for I loves him like my own brother,' says I, 'and many a year have I shed tears over his old bones.' With that they went off, miss, five mile away from Master Danvers' house as the crow flies."

He chuckled softly to himself, as at the story of some great achievement; but his mistress stared at him with astonishment in her pretty eyes.

"But, Quick, if they had business there — if they desired to see Mr. Danvers very weightily!"

Quick jerked his head with a strange little nod, and changed the straw quickly from the right side of his mouth to the left.

"Ay," cried he, "'t was urgent enough, mistress, I 'll be bound. Writs of 'torney and 'tachments, provided, whereas, and aforesaid, they be urgent surely, as Master Danvers knows this many a day. Ecod, the last bailiff that went up to 'The Hollies,' with his 'By your leave' and 'Be it ordained,' and King's name and Queen's name and glory be to God, thirty pounds two shillings and sixpence, they put him in the panel room and made him so drunk as he thought he was Charles the King, and Master Jack was one of the round boys that never would take nothing but his Majesty's head. Three days, mistress, they kept him, and then sent him by carrier up to Husband's Bosworth, Master Jack having no more use for the same. Ay, right well they tricked him, surely; and when he set foot to ground, 't was to ask if he were Charles the King or Peter the Bum; 'for, d — n me' — axing your ladyship's pardon — 'if I know,' says he."

He told it all with a solemn face, as though never in all his life had he laughed outright. His mistress, silent and a little perplexed at the first, now began to be amused at her own thoughts, and to take heart of them.

"They will never get to 'The Hollies,' Quick."

"I trust not, uprighteously, miss."

"You mean honestly, Quick."

"I means what you means, mistress."

"But if they do — if they do!"

"Ay, mistress, if they do. There 's always a hill for the runaway coach. Ecod, Master Jack's coach has been at the gallop these three years and more."

"And it will come to the bottom some day."

"'T will be little bottom in that same coach when the bump comes, mistress. But, trust Master Jack, 't is no bailiff's writ that will harm he. He was n't born to be an inside, not Master Danvers, as sure as I sit on a good horse. There 's ways and ways, and wrong lines of county, mistress; and the 'torney that can follow

Master Jack through the fallow — why, he 's to be foaled — he 's to be foaled when you and I are nobut bones in the churchyard. Ay, trust the Squire of Naseby against the county, bottle for bottle, and one bottle more."

Mistress Nancy, with a word upon her lips, changed it abruptly to ask a question.

"Is not that the very green chaise upon the road before us, Quick ? "

"No other, mistress. The old green chaise and the old black horse, Bouncer, that Farmer Collen used to hunt when I was a boy. Ay, right well I know him for the surliest knock-kneed devil that ever bit a manger."

Mistress Nancy rode on a little, and then reined in her horse. The green chaise had stopped before a farm at the hill's foot, and one of the occupants — a short man in leathers and a long brown coat — had gone to the farmhouse to ask his way. They would find "The Hollies," after all, then! Nancy's heart beat fast when she told herself that they must not.

"They are asking the way, Quick."

"Ay, the lousy, mischievous rabbits, that cannot take an honest man's word!"

"But we shall be there to put them on another road. We owe it to our neighbour. I should think it base, treacherous, if all that could be done by me or my servants were not done for Master Danvers to-day. I will speak to the men myself."

A ray of cunning illumined Quick's little eyes.

"A word with old Bouncer would be more to Master Danvers' good than that same talk, mistress. Ecod, I'd give a guinea if some one would wind a horn on yon hill."

"A pretty project, if I had its meaning."

"Ay, you shall have that, mistress. 'Tice them to Winton Coppice while I cross the fallow for a word with young Kit. There's many a horn at 'The Crown and Cup.' 'T were odd if I had forgotten how to wind a call."

"And when the horn was winded ——?"

"Leave the rest to Bouncer, mistress. The horn 's more than pipe or tabor to he. The old chaise will go fast enough then, I'ze warrant. And it won't be towards Naseby, neither."

"You are a very prince of grooms, Quick."

"And that I won't deny, mistress. Go straight to the farm, and there 'll be no bailiff's man at 'The Hollies' this day. Ay, sure, it was a pretty notion."

Upon this, as the story goes, he turned his horse at the holly hedge which there bordered the high-road, and saying to himself as he went that he would ride to the world's end if thereby he might give his mistress one hour of content, he rode away through the fallow to the sign of "The Crown and Cup," which he had mentioned. But Mistress Nancy went straight on to the farmhouse, and there she happed upon the travellers, the short man in the brown coat, and the tall man in the coat of bottle-green, and when they had bent almost to the ground before her, they besought her to put them on the road to Naseby.

"For," said they, "a murrain on the county which sends persons of quality to dance a roundabout, when, by the living jingo, they come upon the King's good business."

"Oh, your servant, sirs," said Mistress Nancy right proudly, sitting there, they vowed, as some lady of the fables upon a splendid horse, "your servant, sirs, for well I know the stupidity of those that must answer gentlemen from London in the language of these simple people. Accompany me a little way, I beg, and my own groom, who waits for me at the coppice on the hill, shall point the road himself, and see you to Master — Master ——?"

"Danvers — Master Danvers of Naseby."

"Ah, to Master Danvers' house. You are friends of his I presume, gentlemen."

"Ay, friends that will stick to him as leeches to the heart. Your very obedient servant, madame. You put us under outrageous obligations —"

They stepped into the chaise with this, and one of them holding the reins and the

other the whip, and much talk in their mouths of my Lord this, and Sir John that, and other fine persons of their acquaintance, they went up the hill-side after Mistress Nancy; nor could they observe the laughter which from time to time would light her eyes; not the impatience she had come to Winton Coppice, which lay but the half of a mile beyond the farmhouse. Indeed, they rode in much content, and when a horn was winded in the thicket, and old Bouncer pricked up his ears as much as to say, "that makes me young again," they spoke of horseflesh very cunningly, and particularly of the horse which carried them — "a crazy spavined hack that was only fit for the butcher's block."

But presently the horn was winded again, and upon this the great black horse bounded forward toward the wood; and together they cried "Whoa, whoa!" and the one that had the whip let it fall from his hand.

"Stop, stop, madame — don't you see what he's doing? Oh, whoa, whoa, you

son of the devil; nay, pull to the right, blockhead, to the right! Wouldst overturn us!"

Again the horn was winded, and from the far distance a hound gave tongue. Bouncer, they say, went off as a shot from a gun, and side by side with him galloped the splendid chestnut. Never was there such a run to hounds in all Northamptonshire. The chaise bounded in the air as a ball from a bat; it creaked, it groaned dismally, it threw the King's gentlemen as shuttlecocks for sport, now one upon the other, now up, now down, now backward, now forward. They cried for mercy as children from the rod.

"For the love of God, madame, go back! Would you break our necks? Oh, son of a she-devil — steady, steady! I bump like a rock. We are dead men."

But Mistress Nancy, so it is written, her cheeks as fire, her lips close shut, would not seem to hear them; and pressing on, as one that rode for life, toward Winton Thicket, she put her horse presently at a low gate, and, flying it at the bound, she

went away as an arrow from a bow, crying: "Jack is saved, Jack is saved!"

But the two gentlemen from London, who, by the living jingo, were upon the King's good business, liked the leap so little that one of them was left with the half of the chaise in the hollow by the farm; while the other, clinging still to the box, went a-hunting with old Bouncer as never man hunted from that day to this.

Chapter II

We go to "The Hollies" and find Jack Danvers there, with others that have little share in the story

AT five o'clock upon the day of the hunting at Winton Coppice, Jack Danvers, the Squire of Naseby, dined with his friends, Dick Dallas, the parson's son, and Bobby Bellars of Barton, at his house they called "The Hollies;" and the story they told was the story of the green post-chaise, and of those that went hunting therein. When the cloth was removed from the generous table, and the ruby red wine began to flow abundantly all drank the toast of "Nance of the Abbey," not once, but many times; and at each endeavour the narrative gained embellishment and new ornament.

"Ecod, they took the double at Fenters and crossed the red brook twice. There was one of them fell in Welford Spinney and one that went to the Three Firs. They lie at 'The Crown and Cup' to-night, and a waggon takes them to Harborough to-morrow. Ay, they bumped like a ball, I hear, and the man in the bottle-green coat must needs borrow a sack at Hag Westons before he could run up to the inn. Zounds! I'm no town's man that does not know hoof from hock, boys, but I came near a fall from laughing when up comes Bouncer with the shafts between his legs, and yonder lies the bum with his breeches on the box and his body in the fallow. 'Where's the she-devil in the green habit that brought me to this?' says he — and says I, 'Have ye no manners to come before the field like that, sir. Take yourself off,' cries I, 'before you have a lash about your quarters.' Ay, he ran like a hare, boys, with his banner behind him, and such a shout of laughter as you'll never hear at Winton again. Surely, she's a good 'un, is little

Mistress Nance, and that I 'll tell her to-morrow."

The Squire spoke, filling a long clay pipe and lighting it at one of the four candles upon the polished table. A good fire burnt in the great ingle; the curtains were close drawn; the decanter passed quickly. It was a night to talk of wine and women — for of what else might honest men talk when news of the hunting was done.

"You 'll never tell her that, Jack," cried Dick Dallas, the parson's son, "'t would have been told any time these three years if it had been any other. But you have n't the tongue, man. Faith, I can hear you stammering it out like a girl at the catechism. 'Your servant, mistress, and thank you, mistress, and ecod, I 've heard — and ecod, they tell me — and hum — and ha — and all the rest of it.' A pretty picture, Bobby, as I live, the Squire of Naseby telling Mistress Nance she 's a good 'un."

Bobby Bellars of Barton lighted his pipe and uttered a word of deep wisdom.

"Give me a horse," said he, "ay, there 's

reason. You can talk to him. But, damme, a woman — no, it's not to be done."

"Ay," said the Squire, "'t is odd, to be sure. Here can I call to Jerry across a twenty-acre field, and when it comes to a bit of a wench with a laughing face, I'm all stuck like a jibber in the plough. Explain that to me, lads; explain it if you can."

"'T is because of your mettle, Jack. Breed a man with the ladies, and he's as ready as a gentleman of St. James. But school him in the stable, and what shall he say but, 'Whoa, my lass!' and 'Over, girl!' Faith, there you have it. You and I can pass a bottle with any man; but for dead dull dogs where the petticoats are, there is n't the like in Northamptonshire. 'T is the trick of it, lad, the trick we lack. Now, this fine bird that rides to Belton Abbey to-morrow, I'll warrant you that he's as ready with his: 'Why, madame,' and 'Wherefore, madame,' and 'That reminds me, madame,' as old Joe Black, the nonconforming doctor that spouts at Har-

borough on market day. And that's what the women like. 'T is the sauce that makes the bird of love go down. Prate of Diana and Jove and Mistress Aphrodite, and all the gods and goddesses in the books of learning, and the devil take me if at the end you don't come to be Master Mars, and the parson there to spread the net for little Venus. But we 've forgot it, Jack — we 're readier at 'gone away' and 'forrad' and 'we'll all go a-hunting to-day.' We're good wine in dull glasses, and, confound me, the women like to see the ruby colour."

"True entirely," cried Bobby Bellars, "and when the colour's ruby, what's to be done with it if it does n't go to ruby lips. Answer me that, Jack, or Sir Joseph will answer it for you to-morrow, I 'll wager a guinea."

"A scurvy hound that sits a horse like a booby, and is all turned out in silk and satin and Flanders lace like a puppet at the fair, they tell me. Ecod, I 'd give a good deal to see him at the willows on my mare Sprawler. There 'd be some-

thing else on his fine clothes then, lads; and a good laugh at him at the Abbey."

"Offer him the mare as a civility, Jack."

"A devilish cunning rogue, they say, that looks at civilities through a lawyer's glass."

"A mean hound that will have the Abbey for his own come the New Year."

"Ay, that's true, Dick. Nance's father willed it so, though the Lord knows what was in the head of him. 'Marry you shall,' says he to Nance, 'or the Abbey goes to your cousin. I'll have no women's tricks on my land, now that your brother Richard is dead, and if so be as you can't find a man when you've five-and-twenty good years to your back, why, then,' says he, 'your cousin shall care for the estate, and you shall go to London to three hundred pounds a year and your aunt Dorothy's door.' And go she will, the first day of January next year, if this town bird does n't suit her, or she has n't new notions in her obstinate little head. It's as sure as the wind, Dick, as sure as the wind — for where's the man hereabouts that will

have the courage to change her; and what's his chance against Sir Geegaw and the silks, with, 'Lud, Madame,' and 'At your feet, madame,' and all the rest of the parley? There's no chance at all, I say, no more than your black, Bravo, against my five-year old, The Raven. And that's no chance at all, lad."

Dick Dallas, bold in wine, protested hotly.

"Will you match him for a hundred at the weights?"

"You've no hundred to match, Dick."

"Ay, throw my poverty in my face."

"It's too heavy to lift, Dick, and I like your face too much."

Bobby Bellars, in his turn, came in as peacemaker. "I'll match the pair of you for a guinea to drink another bottle of wine," said he.

"Done, done, lad — another bottle against old Dick's humour."

"Then I'll give you a toast — may Joseph Chetwynd rot in a horsepond this night."

"I drink to that — blue breeches and

green weed at Cottesbrook Ford. It could be done, Jack, if you had the mind."

"Would ye send him to the Abbey in a shift?"

"Nay, I'd borrow a smock from Shepherd Winn."

"And to-morrow he'd cut a figure. Ecod, to see him at the gate!"

"He rides to Lamport this night, and lies at 'The Three Feathers;' I had it from your father, Dick. They will be late on the road, for they take dinner at Wellingborough. Catch your town wit coming in with ruffled plumes. No, no; he must lie the night at Lamport, and to-morrow it will be the red velvet and the figured vest, and a sword at his ankles like a buck in the Mall. That's the trap for little Nance. He'll fly the gate at a gallop and find good grass land beyond. Are you going to sit there and see him, Jack?"

Jack Danvers scratched his curly fair hair, and tried, as well as the wine would let him, to understand the question.

"Devil take me," cried he, "if I've

a word to say on it. Silks and velvets were never in my fancy, and there 's the truth, Dick. But if it comes to riding 'un at Welford Gorse, or fighting 'un in Sally's Hollow, why, I'm his man to-morrow. I dislike the fellow already, as I dislike all that 's too fine for honest folk; and, dang 'un, if I could put him in 'The Feathers' pond this night, I 'd do it with a right good will for little Nancy's sake."

He filled his glass again, and began to sing a rollicking catch, which the others took up and bellowed until the rafters rang: —

One in the hollow,
One in the slough,
Fox in the fallow,
Passun in the plough,
And who 'll come a-hunting in the morning ?

"It could be done," says Dick Dallas, when the noise had died down. "Three good horses, and three good men — "

"And his worship's baggage at Tilton Wood. Zounds! What a figure he 'd cut. Are ye of the mind, Bobby ? "

"Ay, Lord, if I 'm of the mind ! "

"Another glass — and, ecod, I 'll lead ye."

And another glass it was, and again a song which made the rafters ring, and again a little argument; and then three rolling figures lurching out into the night together; and through all the yard and all the stable a loud cry of "Ho, Jerry, the horses, you dog, the horses!"

Chapter III

Of a Great Coach with Yellow Wheels. And of what befell at Cottesbrook Ford

THEY rode swiftly, by field and marsh, halloaing to one another as boys at a play; or trolling a merry lay as those who liked their errand. Twice Bobby Bellars put the Raven into an "oxer," and twice he and the colt found their legs again unhurt.

Dick Dallas, on the mare Sprawler, fell at Hare's Gap, and ran a mile across the plough to catch the devil again; but Jack Danvers never once shifted in his seat, nor turned to the right hand or the left. Straight for Cottesbrook Ford rode he — ay, as straight as a writer may lay a rule across a paper. "And, surely," said he, when he got there, "a man may ride upon

his second bottle, for if the whole be better than the half, then saw I two horses this very night, and the devil take me if I did n't sit on the second when the first would blunder."

There was moonlight when they first set out — moonlight and the New Year's mist upon the pasture, a crisp night of January notwithstanding, and a heaven of rolling stars. Heated with the wine and the intention as they were, nevertheless the cold air of evening damped their ardour when they made the ford, and the water never had looked so black or chilling. "A place, surely, to send men to their beds," said Bobby Bellars, the philosopher; but Jack had a flask of brandy in his pocket, and he soon settled that.

"Zounds!" cried he; "I shiver like an aspen. Do you hear them, Dicky, lad?"

Dick Dallas was too far gone with it to hear aught but strange sounds as of rushing waters in his ears, and now he lolled forward on his saddle and answered them incoherently: "A hanging matter, Jack,"

said he; "a hanging matter, and I that am my father's only son."

"A murrain on your hanging matter. If there 's a law to hang those that would compel a gentleman to change his clothes after travel, name it to me, and I go home again. Take a nip of brandy, Dicky, and turn your collar about your ears. Would ye have a hue and cry to-morrow? Then hide your face and hold your tongue when the time comes."

Bobby Bellars approved of the sagacity.

"Pass the flask, Jack. I 'm for politeness above all things, and curse your low tricks. Let the gentleman change with the blinds drawn, say I, and never be it said that we did harm to him."

"And his fine clothes can go up to the Abbey to-morrow in the carrier's cart. He shall say he found them at Welford Cross. Ecod, I 'd give a guinea to see him come in."

"And I 'd put another upon that; but hush, lad, there 's a horse on the road. Mum's the word — mum, and the shadows. Ye have the rope, Dicky."

"We 'll need no rope. Draw your horses to the ford and show them your back, Bobby. Dang 'un, ye would n't use their horses ill. Cry 'Hold!' when the coach is upon ye, and we 'll do the rest."

He turned to the shadows of the hedge with the word; but Bobby Bellars stood at the ford's brink, and when they had all waited very silently for the space of ten minutes or more the great lamp of a coach came suddenly to their view, and presently the coachman's voice was heard crying, "Whoa, whoa!" and a louder voice joined to that, said, "Hold, hold!" and with one and another, the shouting of the men, and the jingling of the harness and the anxious questions of the little old gentleman that rode within, it was a very babble of sounds in the quiet of the night.

"What is it; why do you not go on; what is the matter, coachman?"

"Oh, Lord, sir; oh, Lord, sir; I told you so at 'The Feathers.' Here they be; God save us!"

The little old gentleman sighed, and sank back upon the cushions. The people

at the inn had warned him to rest the night there, but his obstinacy had prevailed. And now there was a great ruffian at the door of his coach. He had never heard such a terrible voice.

"God save you, sir, as yon good fellow says. Here be three poor gentlemen that have had the misfortune to lie this night in Cottesbrook Ford, and would even change clothes with your worship. Come, no parley, old bag of bones — your clothes, your clothes."

The little old gentleman, who was a practised philosopher, answered in a gentle voice:

"I have but one suit in my sack and twenty guineas, gentlemen. They are at your service."

"A murrain on your guineas. Wear them where you must have need of them. We want your clothes, little man — the clothes from your back. Come, off with them, or the devil take me if we don't throw you in the river."

The little old gentleman hesitated no longer. It was very plain to him that

further resistance was not to be thought of; for his servants upon the box were unable to speak a word, and the man at the carriage door was a very prodigy of passion. With reluctant fingers and some fine and scholarly reflections upon jade Fortune, the little old gentleman undressed in the coach, and beheld his clothes made the sport of those without. But the greatest surprise of the night was the purse, which remained to him.

"An odd encounter," he said to himself, when at last the coachman was permitted to drive on. "I shall return to the University of Oxford to write a thesis upon the humours of the predatory instinct, if this adventure permits me to return at all. Zounds, who ever heard of such a thing! To dress a man up in a smock frock with a bag of guineas round his neck, and — er — um — nothing upon his legs. And at twelve o'clock of the night — at twelve o'clock!"

He sighed again, forgetting his philosophy; but by and by he found the courage to put his head out of the window of the

coach and to arrest the attention of his servants.

"John, are the robbers gone?"

"Ay, sir, as straight as arrows and as sure. And lucky for them, too. 'T were at the very instant I was a-getting down to show 'em what sort of a man I am."

"Never mind that, my good fellow. I fear I have been the victim of an outrage. You will observe, John — at least you would observe if you could — that — er — hem — my dress is somewhat incomplete."

The coachman reined in his horses suddenly.

"Why, dang me, if you baint as bare as a Maypole, sir."

"You describe my condition accurately if impolitely, John. I am as bare as a Maypole."

"And the nearest house, the Lord knows how far off."

"Drive thither, nevertheless. Inform them of my adventure. And — er — John, one of the cloths which cover the horses — "

"Ay, to be sure, sir, the very thing for

your poor body. Peters, wrap the gentleman up. Says Sir Joseph: 'Take very particular care of my friend,' says he, and, bless my heart, to think as he should come to a horse-rug. Heard ever man the like — to rob a poor gentleman of his clothes.'

Peter, the footman, descended from his perch, and carried a horse-cloth to the little old gentleman. When he had wrapped it warmly about his legs, and promised a speedy hanging to the miscreants of that encounter, they drove on again; but first there was a question.

"John, the maids of the house — on no account — you understand, John, on no account — "

The coachman winked at Peters, but answered very solemnly: "Not another word, sir. Leave the wenches to me; I knows the medicine for they — the hussies! Rest your poor body, sir, and don't think of it."

The little old gentleman sighed, and lifted the glass.

It was very cold, and his philosophy

was a poor substitute for coat and breeches. He began to regret that he had ever left the University of Oxford, and he fell asleep at last to dream that he disputed with Plato in a garden overlooked by nymphs and fauns who pointed out his condition hilariously.

At eight o'clock next morning, Jerry, the groom, knocked at the door of Jack Danvers' bedroom with a strange tale to tell.

"Here be a gentleman in the stable-yard, sir," said he, "and dang me if I can make anything of him."

"Tell him to go to the devil."

"Ay, surely and he's been there, maister — not a rag to his back, and a horse-cloth for his breeches."

Jack Danvers sat up and tried to gather his addled wits.

"Who is he — what gentleman is it?"

"A scholard he calls himself, sir — a scholard from Oxford — one Doctor Martin, that is the Dean of Trinity College. He come last night in Sir Joseph Chetwynd's

coach; for Sir Joseph, he lies at Lamport, and the coach is to go back for he."

Jack Danvers leaped out of bed at a bound.

"The wrong fox, by all the varmints, and we've sent his clothes to the Abbey. Ecod, that comes of moderation. There 'll be the devil to pay — the devil to pay!"

He began to dress quickly, telling himself the while that Sir Joseph Chetwynd, with his silks and satins, would go to Belton Abbey after all.

"And, ecod," said he, "we 'd never have made such a mistake if we 'd have taken a third bottle."

In which opinion his biographer is also confirmed.

Chapter IV

Which speaks of the French Tongue, and of the Claret Wine; and introduces Rushton, the Attorney

WHILE Doctor Martin of Trinity College at Oxford was warming himself before the great fire in the kitchen of "The Hollies," another scene of a different kind occupied men and maids at Belton Abbey, where Mistress Jacintha, busied herself in preparation for so distinguished a guest as Sir Joseph Chetwynd, her nephew; and did not fail to impress upon little Nancy the importance of that occasion and its meaning.

"Your father's wish, my dear, your own father's wish for his little orphan girl. 'Let her know a good man,' he would say, 'and none of your stable boys that serve

us for polishing in this wild man's land!' Sir Joseph was always one after his own heart— such manners, and such a handsome fellow. 'The very fellow for my little Nance,' your father would say, 'and one who will leave the Abbey better than he found it.' Ay, dear, we must remember that. It was your father's wish, and he would expect us to abide by it."

"Let us see the man first, auntie, and then we shall be able to praise him truthfully. I would not put the cart before the horse, or sure, we shall never get far upon the road. Prove him to me an honest gentleman, and I will not forget my hospitalities. But the argument shall come first, and not the sentence."

"Ay, but you will judge him lightly, Nance. Such a man! Such words! And, dear, we owe it to him, for he is to be master here."

"To be master if he can; or if the mistress of Belton be made of such poor stuff that she must bend the knee to the first adventurer who comes by a dead man's word to her door. Nay, I would

not shame my father's wish; but the gentleman shall be worthy of it, or I will find another way."

Aunt Jacintha, raising her hands in protest, was unable to answer so terrible a heresy. For many years now, she had waited this day when her nephew would come to Belton to take the greater burden of that stewardship upon his shoulders. Playing as far as she could the mother's part to the child her dead brother had left so tragically (for Robert Dene of Belton had been thrown from his horse at Tilton Wood five years before that day), she had wished, nevertheless, for a lighter task than that of the education and charge of this headstrong girl, who lived for all that was not womanly, and found her whole content of life in those robuster exercises which a good Providence had made for men. Sir Joseph, the old lady said, would come to live at Belton as her brother had wished. He would marry her niece before the year was run; and thereafter, Mistress Nancy would begin another life. The excitements of that visit were

not to be measured by any word or deed. For weeks, Aunt Jacintha had driven the maids of the house helter-skelter as hounds to a covert. There was no room in all the house that had not been thrice turned and dusted. Spotless hangings fluttered from the windows, and hung proudly about the beds. Forgotten china was raked up and displayed advantageously; glass, sparkling as diamonds, was made brighter still. She was all for gentility, she declared — the honour of their house demanded above all things that it should be genteel.

"They tell me that claret 's the wine for gentlemen, nowadays, Nance," she would exclaim in one of these genteel moods. "The port wine is for the fox hunters. And, dearie, 't is all the fashion to let drop a word of the French tongue when occasion suits. You will not forget it when Sir Joseph comes. A word of French and a little talk of your kinsman that is cousin to Lord Lorrimore. I would not have them think that we know none but the rough company of the county. So fine a man —"

"Truly, aunt, 't is all of silks and satins and the claret wine, and not of the gentleman at all. Would you marry me to his clothes, then? Am I to be bartered for hose and velvet and the new fashion from France? Nay, I'll have none of it, nor of your town wit, until he shall show me an affable and courteous gentleman. Upon that I am resolved, so please to spare me your argument. Sir Joseph shall find me as I am; and what in my friends displease him shall be to me the better part of them. My father willed the Abbey to go to him when I come to my twenty-fifth birthday and have not found a husband. But there is time for that — and who knows, I may yet ride to Gretna with Rushton, the attorney, before the year is out. Lud, he would saddle a horse if I but lifted a finger — he and many another I could name. There 'll be no lack of lovers when I have need of them. What say you to Jack Danvers now, one that I have loved since first he sat me upon a horse at Naseby Marsh? Should we not make a pretty pair?"

The old lady gave up the combat despairingly.

"Ill the jest befits such an hour, my dear, to name this low company when one of the King's gentlemen is even now riding to your house. I, at least, know what is due to Belton Abbey and its people. None of your fox-hunting people shall come to my door when their betters are here, if I can help it."

Nancy, aflame now with anger, stamped her little foot in a fury of passion.

"But you shall not help it; no one will ask your yea or nay. What, close my door to those that were children with me because a peacock from London is to come strutting up to my hall! Oh, he shall learn who is mistress here, he shall learn it quickly. Let me see the hand that would touch the door of Belton unbidden, and my whip shall speak for me. Shame on you, aunt, with your gentility and your little word of French and your claret wine! Nay, I'll ask them all, and they shall prove whether man be the silk and the satin, or the heart that is honest and

the hand which is kindly. As for your fine gentleman, why, take care of him or he shall find a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip that is little to his liking, I promise you."

She went from the room and from the house with the words. If the truth had been told, this day was the darkest of her girlish life, and one upon which she seemed, without warning, to come to knowledge of her womanhood. During the five years which had followed upon her father's death, she had been the unfettered mistress of Belton. Pleasure loving, impetuous, the toast of the county, devoted to her horses and her dogs, enjoying the gifts of health superabundant, she had put off the reckoning with that evil day when her cousin would remember the inheritance and the condition which should make it his. True, there was ever the shadow of it about her, but it was not a dark shadow; and when she looked into the glass and a pretty face looked back at her, and graceful rounded limbs would pose in attitudes, and her heart beat

quickly at the thoughts which came, she said, surely, that a lover would be found to share her life before that day demanded toll of her. And lovers there had been, a score. No man in all that county who did not draw a rein when she rode by, or envy the lucky dog who would rule some day at Belton Abbey. But to those that found their tongue she had said a ready "nay;" and those that did but sigh were sport for her wit, and the one in all the world who neither spoke nor sighed, upon him her heart was set vainly, for he would never know love of aught but horses; and there was no woman in the kingdom of England who had turned him a hair's-breadth from the straight and narrow way which a good pack follows. Jack Danvers, indeed, was the figure of her dreams, and just because there was no hope of them she clung to that image tenaciously. She knew that there was no truer heart in all the county.

It was five miles as the crow flies from the Abbey house to "The Hollies" at Naseby; but Nance of Belton was no faint

heart of the roads; and when Quick, the groom, had saddled her bay horse, Mulberry, she left a message for her aunt that she was gone upon a visit, and would not be returned until sunset. Temper was in her head, and an anger against all the events of that strange day. She would go to Jack himself and tell her trouble. At least he would hear her kindly, and who could foresee whither kindness might not lead her. As for the fine bird from London who must resent her absence, she was glad to pique him. The speeches he had prepared would gladden old Jacintha's heart. Nance told herself that they would make a pretty pair — and that the spinster was welcome to Sir Joseph, silks and satins and all the rest of it. For herself, she was determined even then to show him no civilities — for never would she play the friend to one she accounted already as an enemy.

She rode straight, a splendid figure upon her great bay horse; and going without detour to the Squire of Naseby's house, she waited at his gate while her groom

went in; and anon, Jack Danvers himself came running down the garden path. He was struggling into a brown cloth coat as he ran, and his leathers were unbuttoned as though he were but just from his bed. But what astonished her chiefly was his unusual embarrassment at her visit, and his petty alarm that she might seek to enter the house.

"Ecod, Nance, lass, I'm glad to see ye, I'm precious glad to see ye. Bide at the door but the popping of a cork and I'll saddle Tip-Top and ride up with ye."

He wore a very red face, she thought, and his hair had not been combed that day. In the merry eyes there was something of the old Jack; but above that a shy look, and a suggestion of shame she could by no means account for. And, moreover, he asked her to wait at his door. She had never heard of such a thing.

"You need not saddle Tip-Top and you must not ride up with me. I came with great news for you, but I have no fancy to tell it at your door. Oh, Jack, where

are your manners that you treat me so!"

Jack blushed like a girl.

"Ecod, Nance, ye know that I'd give ye the house if 't would serve you at all. But, it be a matter of honour, lass, a matter of honour. There's one in there that has no liking — er — ay — that do not wish to — dang 'un — that put me on my word, and that 's plain and the beginning and end on it. So, yow see, I 'm mortal afraid it can't be done."

He stood, lifting now one foot, now the other in his confusion. But she, reading it mistakenly, flushed in her turn, and would hear no more.

"Oh, Jack, Jack, shame on you; shame! I'll hear no more this day. Do not dare to speak to me, Jack — I 'll not listen, never, never — "

Her passion astonished him. Before he could speak a word in his defence, or make good the errors of his apology, she was away at a canter across the paddock toward Naseby Marsh. In vain he ran after her, whooping and halloaing with

all his lungs. "A scholard, I tell thee, a scholard from Oxford that has but a horse-cloth to his back. Wilt listen, lass, a scholard from Oxford that would sooner perish this instant than find a wench in my parlour. Hey, come back, Nance, and ye shall see 'un — ecod, I've done it this day surely — and all for the want of a third bottle."

He stopped short, seeing that pursuit was hopeless, and returned with slow steps and puzzled head. But Nance rode on with anger at her heart and a great rage against all the world to be her companion on the road. There was no longer any friend left to her in all the county, she said. She would never believe in any one any more. Jack had been the last, and now he had insulted her at the very door of his own house. His tale, that he had a "scholard" of Oxford there, was one he should have told to her aunt Jacintha, or to old Maud Martha, who kept his home for him. She blamed herself because of her trust in him, and went on adding to her wealth of wrongs and in-

justice as she rode. Fate had willed her complete surrender to the man whom her father had sent to be the master of the Abbey. She was being driven to her doom by destiny; she saw no loophole; could imagine no harbourage from that defeat. Jack had been her last hope — and he had acted thus basely. She said that she would never speak to him again if she lived to be a hundred.

It was early morning yet; and she had no desire to return to Belton. Hunting in these days was no everyday affair when a Cottesmore blank becomes a Pytchley fixture, and Sir Bache Cunards' round off the week. To-morrow the hounds would meet at Welford Spinney; but to-day she must idle away the long hours, and find what barrier she could between herself and the man of silks and satins. And so she rode slowly by Naseby Marsh to Lamport; and thence to the highroad by which she must return to the Abbey. It was here that she met Rushton, the attorney, riding a grey cob towards Harborough, and not a little pleased to see her, as ever

he was. A man of much cunning, the county called him; one that would rob you of your very boots while you sat in his dingy little office and were soothed by his unctuous voice, or silenced by the strange unholy eyes which could see through and through your head, as the farmers declared, and know what was in the mind of a man, "ecod, before he knew it himself." Rushton had ever pursued Nance of Belton with a quiet persistency which sometimes affrighted her. His long, wise face, his limpid eyes, his thick black hair ribboned also in black, his sober coat which never had a spot upon it, his jewelled snuff-boat, and gold-topped cane were all of a piece with that quiet prosperity and discreet determination which characterised the man. Nance had heard the gossips' tongues which said that Rushton had sworn to go to Belton as its master. She told herself sometimes that he would make his word good — would marry her yet, despite her many and decided answers to his importunities. He was the one man in all Northamptonshire she feared, and

the fear she set down rather to the man's will than to her own weakness.

The attorney had been a little way ahead of her when she struck the high road, but he drew rein as she put her horse at the burn, and waited without turning until she came up. His greeting was neither very servile nor in any way condescending, but the plain word of a man who did not think overmuch of the world's civilities.

"The very last person I should have looked for upon the road to Harborough to-day. Fortune is good to me, young lady, as she is always good to those who do not trust her."

"Then I shall not say the same for her, Mr. Rushton, for I was always one that hoped much of her kindness."

"And reaped little. The way of this odd world. Nay, admit it is an odd world, young lady, or why should I find you riding five miles from Belton, when, by all accounts, the Abbey most has need of you."

"That is a question you well may ask me, sir, and I may well refuse to answer.

Curiosity, Mr. Rushton, ill befits a man, though a woman may wear it as of right. I go to Naseby because it pleases me, and if it please me, too, I will ride home again."

She laughed at the thrust, while he watched her with an admiration he never could disguise in her presence. Their horses were now going at a walk, and from time to time he took from his pocket a great gold snuff-box, from the lid of which the red face of George the King, stamping upon a green dragon, looked up at him good-humouredly; and laying the good rappee upon the back of his hand in a thin straight line, he consumed vast quantities of it, as one whose brain needed a constant stimulant.

"Nay," he said, "our will is not always our best friend, Mistress Dene. Consider how often we must show a smiling face to those we would gladly see no more. Add will to foresight, and you find me a proper man. Ay, where should I be to-day if I had let my will prevail upon my interest? At a desk, young lady, with

a quill in my hand. But discretion is my motto, discretion which waits upon the opportunity. It is much to know how to wait, as our French neighbours say. Women rarely learn the trick. They are all for impulse, and out upon it at the moment. They would never make good lawyers, my child, for egad, they'd tell all their secrets to the opposition under an oath of confidence."

"Which means to say, sir, that honesty has come to make a friend of my sex, after all. A compliment, I vow. For who ever heard of woman going to the law until law came to the woman. Ay, sure, Mr. Rushton, the world went very well before the lawyers found it ill, and if it lacked them to-morrow, who would be one penny the worse?"

The attorney nodded his head as one pleased at her sagacity.

"The world abuses its attorneys because it is always trying a fall with them and getting a rap for its pains. It envies us because we are rich, and mocks our abilities when we are poor. Would it be less

kind to me to-morrow, young lady, if I lacked a guinea for my purse. Assuredly not! Then let us leave it out of our account. You say that woman never goes to the law until the law comes to her — ay, and that is true; but if you and I know one whom the law may visit this very month, why, then, may we not wish that in the law she shall find a friend who will serve her, not because of the law, but by reason of his friendship? I speak an enigma — but you may read it. And when you are of my mind, you have but to say: 'I will it, I foresee help, counsel, the safety of my house,' and these things will be accomplished. Further I may not presume, lest my honesty be questioned in the bargain. Sir Joseph Chetwynd, who comes to your house to-day, is a determined fellow, they tell me. If he also be set upon a purpose, he may prove a worthy antagonist. But I know one that will throw the glove to him, ay readily, when you so much as lift a finger. It will be for you to say, ay, or nay, at your discretion."

Nance had grown mighty serious while he talked; for she did not hide it from herself that it was both Rushton the lover, and Rushton the attorney, that spoke this time. The sly reference to the law, which might be called upon some day to arbitrate as between Sir Joseph and herself for the possession of Belton Abbey, was a new weapon in the armoury of this old suitor, who ever spoke with that air of assured success which both alarmed and angered her. Nevertheless, it was to her consolation that she recognised a friend whose counsel at least was shrewd and far-seeing. Rushton might help her even yet to save the Abbey, she thought.

"Your friendship is always a good remembrance, Mr. Rushton," she said gently; "but do not speak of my discretion. There's little of that at Belton Abbey, or ever was. My father wrote a promise which he gave in anger, and in anger would have been taken away if he had lived. But what's done is done, and all the law in the kingdom cannot turn the bed that he made for me. If lifting a finger would do it, readily

I would lift them all; but you counsel me to foresight; and, surely, when a woman lifts a finger to a man, she may not complain if something bright shines upon it which only the law can take off again. Nay, I'll lift no finger yet awhile."

The head of King George upon the snuff-box appeared again — but the attorney thought it had a savage look.

"Haste is the friend of indiscretion," he said; "we will learn how to wait, young lady."

"Ay, for is not this the twelfth day of January, and take twelve from three hundred and fifty, and how many are left?"

The attorney snuffed with much deliberation. There was a sly look in his eye when he answered:

"Why, to be sure, there are two left."

"Two, Mr. Rushton?"

"Ay, certainly — Ebenezer Rushton, the attorney, and his wife."

Nancy laughed again and tightened her rein.

"I shall come to see them," she said.

"In which case you will see a miracle —

a face in the glass which, I'll swear, you shall know for your own. Nay, we'll crack such a bottle that day as shall make Parson Dallas swear that he has wedded Mistress Nancy Dene of Belton. And found a friend for her," he added.

He spoke with no little earnestness; but Nance, feigning the jest, turned her horse toward the spinney gate, and so homeward to Belton.

"I must do no ill to Mr. Dallas," she said lightly; "he was my father's friend, and has no taste for miracles. But I will not forget you, Mr. Rushton, should the day come — and, believe me, I have need of good counsel."

With that, she waved her hand to him, and was gone at a canter away into the heart of the wood.

But Rushton, the attorney, looking down at the head of George the King, said that for a devilish, perplexing, pusillanimous countenance, he had never seen its fellow.

Chapter V

Which brings Sir Joseph Chetwynd to Belton

THE gates of the park were open when Mistress Nance came home, and Jacob the gardener said that the great folk from London had just gone up to the house. In the stable yard she saw a monstrous yellow coach, all splashed with the winter's mud; and strange grooms and strange horses were standing there as though by right of old possession. It was to her chagrin that she remembered how distant the day must be before these intruders would go upon their way again; but her old habit of authority forbade confession of her temper; and wishing first of all to show them who was mistress there, she entered the hall boldly, and found her cousin, Sir Joseph Chetwynd, standing before the blazing fire

as a man who has come home at last after many wanderings. He had been talking to her aunt Jacintha; nor was he in any haste to welcome her; but continuing an instant in his talk, as though unaware of her presence, he turned presently and made a feint of seeing her.

"So this is my cousin Nancy," he said.

"Your obedient cousin Nancy, sir, who would welcome you to Belton if her eyes did not tell her that welcome is no longer necessary."

"Egad, a thrust at me already, aunt. Well, well, the children nowadays must be taken as we find them, and, I vow, that is at a high price. Come nearer to the fire, cousin. I like to see young faces in these old frames."

He made a place for her; and she advanced sullenly, unable upon the spur of it to answer him. In such a tone, and thus authoritatively, had her own father spoken in the forgotten days of her childhood.

"Your cousin has been telling us of his terrible adventures, child," said old

Jacintha, who was not a little shocked at Nancy's indifference; "the robbers stopped his coach, my dear, at Cottesbrook Ford. By the mercy of God there was none but a doctor of Oxford within — none but a doctor of Oxford. It was miraculous, I declare."

"A miracle of the loaves and the fishes, shall we say, cousin? For what was one, and he no more than a poor parson, among so many. Ay, 't was lucky, upon my word, for had I been within, God knows in what attire I had come to your door. And the doctor, they tell me, lies at a neighbour's house, dressed like a fox-hunter at the chase. Zounds, there 's a brush for his coffee-house."

Nancy, in spite of her chagrin, was all ears for the news.

"I have heard the story, sir; but I gave no credence to it. It is true, then, that your coach was stopped?"

"As true as my cousin's pretty face. I lay the night at Lamport, desiring to cut as good a figure as might be at the court of Belton to-day. The doctor I found very

desirous to get on to Harborough upon a family matter, but troubled, as many of us upon life's journey, with a broken wheel. What more natural, then, that I should play the Samaritan's part and pop him in my coach for the journey. Oil for his wheels, and wine for his heart, as devilishly sour a vintage as ever man drank, but nectar to the poor parson, since good or bad are but abstract matters of comparison. And to-day he wears a fox-hunter's coat — and, it may be, swears like one — so much is habit in the gown and virtue the price of our neighbour's esteem. I, at least, acquit myself of blame. And I do not come to you in a smock-frock and a horse-cloth, my dear —"

He laughed very softly, and in a high key, a meaning, unnatural laugh, which Mistress Nance was to hear and to resent many a day in those coming months of intrigue and trouble. She found him already to differ much from that Sir Joseph Chetwynd she had imagined — for there was little of the fop in his plain coat of blue cloth, and while he wore a vest very

elaborately broidered in thread of gold and silver, it gave him no air of courtliness or grace, but was like gay harness upon an ill-shaped horse. Looking all his forty years, his brown hair was thickly sown with grey, his eyes were large and lightless, the eyes of a man that had served few emotions. But of his white expressionless face, the nose was the oddest feature, Nance said; for it was as though it had been an afterthought, the work of an architect grown weary, who had cried, "If you must have a nose, take this one," and so had thrown it at him. Big, misshapen, turned to the right side, greatly broad and ill-fitting, it spoke rather of the market-place than the palace, of the farmer before the gallant. Nance told herself that she and her cousin would never be friends. And already she recanted her judgment upon Jack. There was a poor scholar, after all! She knew that she had been very unkind to Master Danvers; and tomorrow at the hunt she resolved to tell him so.

"The misfortunes of others sit lightly

"With his jewelled snuffbox in his hand"

upon our shoulders," she said, when Sir Joseph had made an end of it; "your friend, the doctor of Oxford, is in good hands, sir, for he lies at the house of our neighbour, Mr. Danvers, who has played the Samaritan's part so well to others that he is like to find himself upon the high road presently. I promise you an easy conscience upon that score, and beg you to bring no reproaches to Belton. A fox-hunter's coat often covers an honest heart — ay, and a better man than ever carried lace and silver. You will see many a one if you linger at Belton, sir — "

She had somewhat recovered her old carriage now, and could lift a brave face to his. In turn, he heard her with a changeless smile, as one amused at a child's talk, and finding it unworthy a serious answer. Indeed, he spoke very deliberately, standing there with his jewelled snuff-box in his hand and his air of mastery which he had worn from the beginning.

"Nay, cousin, if I do not linger at Belton, where would you have me to go, unless it be to the house of this same Mr. Danvers,

who befriends our little parson. Am I not here to do the work which your father willed me to do? Is there not a man's task in this estate — needing a man, surely, as my eyes told me when I crossed the park? Your aunt's good counsel will soon show me where my labours must begin. If our friend, Dr. Martin, were here, he would say, '*Nihil ordinatum est, quod praecipitatur et properat.*' Nevertheless, I shall lose no time. Organisation, method, will, purpose — these will make Belton what I intend it to be. '*Hae mihi erunt artes,*' as Virgil says. I have always imagined myself as the father of simple pleasures; you shall help me, cousin, to the enjoyment of them."

His great condescension, his reflection upon her stewardship angered her, despite his suave and ready manner. For an instant she took the *rôle* of a country lass, and played the child's part anew.

"La, sir," she said, "'t is a fine speech, but forgive me if I have not the French tongue to understand its meaning."

Sir Joseph snuffed quickly.

"Zounds, my child; have they not taught thee that Virgil is a Latin author?"

"If it please you, sir, they have taught me but the English tongue."

Aunt Jacintha, ashamed of her pupil, hastened to protest.

"Upon my word, niece, I never heard the like of it! And forty good pounds paid to Dr. Dallas for the Latin tongue!"

"Ay, trust a parson to sell his Latin dearly when he has little of that commodity in his house. Well, we shall make good his niggardness, and shall not charge you forty pounds, cousin."

"Oh, sir, your most obedient servant; you will find me a most unready pupil."

"Out upon it; we will be as good friends upon the book as your fox-hunters upon the bottle. Which reminds me, aunt, since bottles are the talk, that you shall give me an early dinner this day; for surely riding sharpens a man. Upon my life, I have the appetite of one of those gentlemen we mention. To-morrow, Mistress Nance and I will cross Belton Park and speak the French together as

we go. To-day, as Euripides says, we will serve tables — "

Nance stood a moment defiantly before him.

"I fear you must walk alone, sir," she cried; "to-morrow I hunt with Mr. Dallas of Naseby."

"An employment for farmers, my child."

"No," she said; "for men, Sir Joseph."

With which word she went from him to her own room, and said that an enemy had come to Belton.

Chapter VI

Wherein all go a-hunting, and Mistress Nance comes home again

EIGHT o'clock of the morning found Nance at the door of Belton, listening with rage and anger at her heart to the complaints of her old groom, Quick.

"I do tell 'ee truly, miss, there'll be naw huntin' this day, for Sir Joseph he have given his orders, and 'Quick,' he says, 'I'll go through the stables this morning, surely.' And when a gentleman like that do say something, ecod, he means it, mistress, I do assure 'ee."

Nance, dressed in a pretty brown habit, with her light brown hair knotted in a blue ribbon, flicked her whip upon her skirt two or three times, and then said very gently:

"But, Quick, what has Sir Joseph or his opinion to do with me?"

"Ay, that's what all the folks be asking, miss; what 'ave 'ee to do with we."

"You will saddle my horse at once, Quick, and bring him to the door. Get your best coat on and ride Mulberry to Welford. If Sir Joseph Chetwynd has anything to say, let him say it to me."

She turned angrily to enter the house, and met her cousin in the outer porch. He was dressed very sprucely this morning, and his blue coat had given place to one of brown velvet, while a multitude of gold and jewelled seals hung at his fob. He greeted her with a studied bow, in which she read both irony and discovery.

"So, sir," she exclaimed, "you have been giving orders to my grooms!"

"As true as the four gospels, cousin — if there be four, since, upon my life, I have no head for the figures."

"You are very obliging, sir."

"Nay, no thanks, little cousin."

"I speak none to those who do not

remember who is mistress of Belton. My groom is gone this instant to saddle my horse. Pray call him back that we may see to which of us he will hearken."

Again she flicked her whip against her skirt sharply, and for an instant the two faced each other unflinchingly. When Sir Joseph spoke, he fingered his snuff-box very nervously, but continued to smile as one amused.

"Ha!" he said, "here is dignity at war already with prudence. But prudence will win, my child, prudence will win. If you have the mind for fox-hunters, you shall have them, ay, for a word of mine. I was hoping for better things."

He snuffed deliberately, and repeated in a low voice, as though he liked them, the words "for better things." The retort robbed her of all her well-prepared attack. She was angry with herself because she could not say that which was in her mind.

"Dignity, sir, at least has strength enough to find a whip for an unwilling groom, as you may see do you bide here

long enough. Whatever right my father gave you has yet a year to wait at my gates. I shall not hasten to open them, believe me."

He bowed with that odd expression still upon his colourless face. "Well spoken, little cousin; we shall make something of you yet. Go to your fox-hunters, and when they bring you to bed of a broken limb, I will show you what a surgeon I am. Meanwhile, do not think ill of me for wishing well to Belton. Should I hold your father's name in reverence if I forgot so great a charge? Nay, I'll not forget it for all the foxes in Northampton."

With this he turned away as one who felt himself to be a very worthy man rebuking a self-willed child; but Nance stood angry and silent, for while her good instinct told her that the man had no right to the counsellor's robe he wore, none the less the accusation, that she had neglected Belton, stung her, and was not to be met by temper or retort. When Quick came up with the horse, he found her very silent and pensive upon the steps

of the house, nor did her victory now give her any satisfaction.

"Thee do beat 'un surely, mistress," said the groom with a chuckle, as he backed Slim to the door, and she put her foot into the stirrup-iron. "I knaw'd thee 'd have thy own way."

"Hold your tongue, Quick, until I ask your opinion."

"Ay, miss, an' that 's what I hear from all of 'em this morning. 'Hold thy tongue 'til thy opinion be asked.' 'Taint like Belton to be plucking a man's tongue out for so much as giving 'ee a civil word. 'T is not the same house since yesterday, surely."

He shook his little round head, which was for all the world like a turnip with two grey beads for the eyes, and, mounting his own horse, he rode after his mistress through the southern gate of the park towards Welford, whither all Northamptonshire and half Leicestershire had business that day. There were many upon the high road already; round-barrelled farmers in good homespun and leathers;

smart horsemen from Harborough and Husband's Bosworth in spotless pink and boots which shone as mirrors; bucks from London, who were brave enough across the grass, but retiring when post and rails barred the way; dowdy fellows, who made no talk of it, but were devils when the hounds gave tongue — all were there on that nipping morning of January, and all paid ready homage to the mistress of Belton, "the goodest plucked 'un that ever sat a horse in all the county." But Nance had no ears for their compliments or their gossip. She had never gone a-hunting so listlessly. Quick, the groom, sighed as he watched her. It was odd that one should so change in twenty hours.

"Ecod, mistress," he said at last, for he was never a man to hold his tongue when he could use it; "ecod, 't is the very morning for hunting, as sure as I do sit upon old Mulberry. Why, there be a hundred folk going to Welford if there be one. And Sir Joseph, him a-poking over the fire, they tell me, with his

nose in a book. Who ever heard the like of that for a good Christian that has no scent for a fox, but only for a crabbed bit of writing. 'T aint no good to no man, and never will be. Ecod, you do well not to listen to such as 'ee, miss. I never thought nothing of a gentleman that don't know a good horse when he sees one — and he don't know a horse, why, not from a rabbit."

He repeated it emphatically — "not from a rabbit, miss," and continued for a long while to shake his round head slowly as though there were something inside it which troubled him. Nance, in her turn, could never be long out of humour with the best of her servants, and she repented already of her harsh word to him.

"Tell me, Quick," she asked presently, as though it were a question of her trouble, "is there any one at Belton, any of my servants, who thinks himself neglected or unhappy — any who has trouble of which I do not know?"

Quick stared at her in good amazement.

"Trouble, miss; why, bless my 'art, they do worship the very ground you treads upon. Who ever heard of such a thing? Let 'em speak to me of trouble, the lazy, over-fed dogs, and I'll give 'em summat to be troubled about. Whatever do make 'ee ask that?"

Nance would not hear his question, but went on with it.

"There is no one ill or in want in the cottages, Quick; no one who is afraid to tell me of his necessity?"

"Ay, mistress, what a question for a hunting morning. Let 'em be ill or wanting, or think that they be ill or wanting, and there they go, running up to the great house like hungry pigs to the trough. 'T is your kind heart that spoils 'em, mistress, ah! and spoils the like of me, as would sooner make passun's work up at the churchyard than leave the home you give me. Don't you trouble your head about it, lady. If ever another comes to Belton, which God forbid, say I, they 'll learn how the wind blows, and it won't be westerly, neither."

He spoke very much from his heart, the heart of an honest man, who could add wisdom to fidelity and give of that abundant fruit. To Nance his words were as sunshine of the day. If there had been neglect at Belton, then, surely, it was that neglect which can make the poor forget their poverty and bring laughter to the children's eyes. Never would her dead father have blamed her on such a score, nor would she blame herself. A muddle of order, it might have been, she said, when guineas were not looked at twice, and worthiness was ever a passport to generosity. But the end was sure — the abiding charity which is the gift of love.

Her eyes were brighter when she thought of this, and something of her true spirit came back to her. After all she was going a-hunting, and what other pleasure in all the world was like to that. The mocking tone in which her cousin had spoken of her fox-hunting friends angered her to contempt of him, for he was a coward, she said; and cowards always

earned her contumely. She would show him, if he stayed long enough at Belton, to what sort of a bed good riding would bring her. And to-day she would forget all her trouble — except when she mimicked her cousin before Jack and the others, and told them how that Sir Joseph was coming out to nurse her when Slim forgot his cleverness.

It was a pretty pantomime at the covert side; and none laughed heartier than Jack Danvers (who showed you the fine figure of a man with his fresh boyish face, and his merry blue eyes, and his spotless pink and shining boots, and bold black hunter under him). Dick Dallas, the parson's son, was there, too, upon a gallant cob; and Bobby Bellars, the Squire of Barton; and Rushton, the attorney, looking as though his lean long face had just come out of a picture to meet a tailor's lad with brand-new clothes from a brand-new box; while the gold topped snuff-box had hastened to join itself to the party lest by any chance it should be left out in the cold. All there grouped themselves about Nance

to listen to her story. She was a born play actress when she had the mind, they said.

"My cousin is a great man, sirs; go to the right side of his face and you will see his nose; but upon the left side you will not see it. He is so old that it is all 'Eh gad, child,' and 'Prithee, little cousin,' and 'Come hither, little Nancy, for I like young faces.' And Belton, sirs, is to be made new, so that when you come again you will not know your way to my door. 'Lud, aunt, how the place wants a man's hand — ' and, I'll vow, if a hand be needed, he has one big enough for three, so that he has only to lift it and all the stars go out. But I am not to go fox-hunting any more, for that is not book-learning, and 'Lud, aunt, she has not a word of the French tongue, I 'll wager.' So I left him at his books for he has no mind for a horse, ye know, and 'Lud, little Nance, they 'll bring you back upon a hurdle as sure as my hair is growing grey on my head.'"

They roared at the sally and at her rare

wit in catching the tone and the gesture of the man she mimicked. The notion that there was any good in books moved them to mirth which made the woods ring.

"Ecod," cried Jack Danvers, "give me a 'gone away' before all your French and Latin fardels that ever a scholard wrote. What be the good of books to any one but a passun, who can read a man a pretty sleep from Exodus, as Dicky will admit? Never knew I a man that was worthy a guinea who poked his nose in books and would not see the bottle when it passed him."

"They 'll never say that of you, Jack," cried Nance, laughing anew at his earnestness.

"Dang 'un, they sha'n't, lass, while I 've a bottle to pass. For that 's honesty, say I, to do as your fathers did — and never sat a prettier man on a horse than my old dad."

Rushton, the lawyer, opening and shutting his great gold snuff-box, watched Nance sharply.

"Your cousin does not like our country

ways, then, Miss Dene. It is, they tell me, the fashion of quality nowadays to despise those simple pleasures which indulgence has made no longer possible. Youth writes a *post obit* which middle age presents. Your account of affairs at Belton to-day does not make it appear that we have found a willing neighbour."

"A sour, crab-faced curmudgeon, I 'll warrant you," exclaimed Jack emphatically; "bring him to Welford Spinney and I 'll show him the simple pleasures he prates on. Eh, Dick, is Yelverton Burn a simple pleasure? You were in it last week, lad, and should know a tale or two."

"Three feet of honest mud and a crown of rushes for your head, Jack. The lilies of the field were not arrayed as one of these."

"Ay, and all the French tongue and the Greek won't catch your horse when you 're the wrong side of the brook and he 's on the right. Ecod, I 'd like to show Sir Joseph the way over that, dang 'un, I would."

"An opportunity you must wait for, Mister Danvers," said the lawyer; "do not forget that discretion at the gate is sometimes able to laugh at rashness in the water. Let Mistress Dene go with a careful rein, say I, or her cousin may yet pluck a hurdle for her."

"Nay, I was never one to draw a careful rein, Mr. Rushton, and shall I begin now because there is a stranger at Belton. Send me to the books at once, for I would sooner go than be discretion at the gate. And if a hurdle must be plucked, why, then, I 'll come to my old friends, and Master Danvers shall look the law in the face, while the Squire of Barton forgets that Master Dick saw him in Yelverton Burn last week. What! will it be said that none turned back because Nance of Belton was down. Ah, but I won't believe it, for old friends are best whatever their errand be."

"A wise word, a wise word," chimed in Rushton, the attorney, "old friends, old wine, old faces, as Master Goldsmith says in his play — to which Master Dallas

here might not wish to add, 'old brooks.' But I 'll not promise to look Jack Danvers in the face when the lady of Belton lies before me. Paris does not pass a word with Menelaus when Helen is at his feet. You ask too much, mistress — "

"Ay, if you 'd pass for that same Greek beauty, we 'll not pay the price, Master Rushton," cried Jack in his turn. "Ecod, your talk is not to my liking at all. A devilish gloomy man-of-the-pit kind of talk, I call it. Let the bill be paid when the bailiff is by the door, say I. 'T will be time enough to pluck your hurdles when the horse has pecked — eh, Mistress Nance, ye 'll have none of their 'sparks-fly-upwards' on a hunting morning, I 'll wager — "

"Not a word of it, Jack, for there goes the horn, and would you have me left at covert-side when hounds break?"

The clear note, ringing in the wood as the sweetest music of the morning, ended their argument upon the instant and sent them at a canter toward the spinney. And they were but just in time, as Dicky,

despite greater things to speak of, told his father, the parson, at dinner that evening. A fine fox going fast towards Crick was a thing to make any man forget what lay before him, ay, and who lay behind him. Nance said that there could be nothing else in life like this first swift gallop when the rush of horses was as thunder of the storm, and only the best got away with the hounds. No time to pick and choose your place at the bristling rails then; no time for discretion, no time for all those fine platitudes which old riders uttered when the bottle twice was passed; no time for anything but a good horse and a stout heart, and hey, for the open and the straight true line. There was no prettier rider in Northamptonshire than Nancy Dene, men said; and that was no flattery. She would show them that morning what kind of a hurdle she came home upon.

They were all away in the first flight, Jack's old black making a way for himself like a bull in a farmyard; Dick's cob jumping "big" as though a good heart went over with him; Rushton, the lawyer,

grown mighty serious but riding with determination and unobtrusive devilry — the parson himself forgetting his gown because it was not Sunday — "and, oh, man," as they would tell you at "The Feathers," "but Parson Dallas *do* ride a hoss."

"Reverend sir," a stranger once said to Parson Dallas at the height of a gallop, "what is on the other side of yon fence?"; but the parson answered (as "The Feathers" will tell you), "To hell with the other side," and went down twenty feet to a gravel pit, whence he was hauled up by ropes to see another in his pulpit for many a long and weary week. On this particular day, it was Parson Dallas who found himself side by side with Nance of Belton, rising with her to the fences, keeping step with her almost across the grass, telling her when he could spare breath that the fox was going for Crick, "and lock up my cellar if there be three at the death." The terrible wager almost affrighted his pretty companion.

What would Belton do with a parson whose cellar was locked up?

She had never ridden with better courage or a truer instinct for a line of country. The sharp biting wind, the green fields, the scarlet-coated men, the white dots upon the landscapes where the hounds ran made for her a picture which none in old England could surpass. Out on your town-wits, and your lace fripperies, and your word of the French tongue! She had old Slim, her chestnut, under her; he carried her reputation as some emblem of his honour. It was an ecstasy to go straight as a ruler upon the paper—for Crick and the death; ay, and for the joy of it and the gallop's unsurpassable delight and the young life coursing in her veins. She would show them what sort of a hurdle she came home upon. The great "double" which lies on the hither side of Yelverton Burn had never seemed so paltry. A child upon a pony could jump it, she said. No need for aught but well-gathered reins, a light hold upon old Slim's head, a good word to him. And he went at it with

a lion's heart. Alas and alas, as the parson said, who is to tell even a good horse that a broken cart-wheel may lie in the lane which a stout fence hides!

They fell together, Nance and her chestnut; for the "rare plucked 'un" pecked at the cart-wheel, and, shambling, came over with his mistress so heavily that she was flung almost at the parson's feet. But that godly man was not at her side before Jack Danvers, and Jack had but leaped from his horse when Rushton, the lawyer, came galloping up, and with him Dicky Dallas and the Squire of Belton. Five men more miserable never were gathered together upon a work of pity.

"We shall need a hurdle after all," cried the lawyer; but Jack said:

"Ecod, ye 'll not, for I 'll carry her to Belton myself."

Chapter VII

Wherein it is shown that a Lawyer can take a hint as well as any other man

MORLY, clerk to Rushton, the attorney, was quite sure that Sir Joseph Chetwynd's coach stood at the door of his master's house in Harborough; but, being a man of a legal turn of mind, and very prudent in his opinions, he would venture no more than a surmise when he carried the news to the office wherein the lawyer sat.

"A strange coach, sir — by the look of him, from the Abbey. I would make bold to say that there is a stranger inside it."

Rushton, with a great roll of papers before him, looked over them sharply at his little clerk, whose pen was already behind his ear.

"Not Miss Dene's coach, then."

"Not Miss Dene's coach, sir, I venture as much. Crest a lion rampant upon a silver scroll, panels blue, a pair of grey horses new to Harborough."

"Sir Joseph Chetwynd, without doubt. I am at liberty, Morly, when I have finished with Lord Harden — who will just be going out."

Morly repeated the words — "who will just be going out" with unction, and having taken his quill from his ear and put it back again, he went to tell Sir Joseph Chetwynd that his master was at that moment busily engaged with the Earl of Harden (who, truth to tell, had not been in the house since yesterday), but would be delighted to see any one from Belton at the earliest possible opportunity.

"Ah, that's what I call the *prevarication legitimus*," he said to Brag, the boy, when he returned to his own office, and the quill was busy once more; "fortune sends the Earl of Harden to us yesterday to shelter from the rain. Ergo, or rather, *post hoc*, which is the sequence to *propter*

hoc, we shall be busily engaged upon his lordship's affairs for the next six months. Imitate that for a *factum quod sit*, and you may come to the Woolsack, lad — where Mr. Rushton would be if he had his dues, ay, above the heads of the nobility and gentry they call our betters. Our betters — faugh! I surmise an opinion that the man who can better Ebenezer Rushton has yet to be born."

Brag, the boy, contented himself with the remark that Master Morly knew a thing or two, and that he should n't be surprised if he and his master sat upon the Woolsack together; after which, at the clerk's instruction, he went to the keyhole of the private office to pick up such fragments of the talk between Sir Joseph Chetwynd and the lawyer as a small lock and a very large ear vouchsafed to him. If he learned little, the reason lay in the very confidential nature of Sir Joseph's talk, as that worthy baronet protested almost with his first word.

"As one man of the world to another, Master Rushton, let us even say, as the

"He went to the keyhole of the private office"

two men in this county who have some sense in our heads, we meet under this desirable roof. I am greatly pleased to make the acquaintance of one as famous for his own discretion as for that he imparts to others. With such a man, I am frank, free, outspoken. There is a wisdom of words, sir; but it does not concern itself always with their economies. Permit me the liberty of your confidence!"

Rushton took off his gold spectacles, wiped the glasses, put them on again.

"I drew the late Robert Dene's will," he said quietly; "there should be few who know as much of Belton Abbey as I do. And yet, sir, much knowledge may be as dangerous as a little. I beg you will regard me as one who has the interests of that house very much at heart."

"If I did not do so, I should not be at Harborough to-day — with better news of my cousin, Mr. Rushton, with entirely favourable news."

"Ha, I am pleased to hear that. It would be five weeks to-day since the accident, I think, Sir Joseph. Five weeks al-

most to the hour. Well, there are some hopes a wise man does not delude himself with. I was in the lane when Miss Dene fell, and I never thought that we should see her upon a horse again."

"A just conclusion. Any other but my cousin would be in Belton churchyard for a half of the hurt she should have received. I shall begin to think by and by that a special Providence sits upon the cantle of a fox-hunter's saddle."

"A shrewd guess, Sir Joseph. '*Virtus in astra tendit*,' as Seneca reminds us. But we shall not look for cartwheels beyond the heavenly fences. Mistress Dene is a very bold horsewoman. Remember the adage that in love and danger, courage is our best friend."

"Eh, gad, I admit the former, but the latter is not to my taste, sir. Never took I danger's road when I could leave it at the inn behind me. You have some sympathy with these fox-hunters yourself, sir, so we 'll say no more upon it. The young lady is like to be herself again before May comes, and what is May but the month of

mirth and youth and warm desire, as Master Milton has told us."

Rushton nodded assent as though the notion pleased him. A little colour flushed his usually pale cheeks — he was won by that praise of May.

"Great news, Sir Joseph? I have been coming every day these last ten days to the Abbey to carry my respects to the Mistress of Belton. I must hasten now to express my pleasure. There will be many from Harborough upon that errand, I surmise."

He seemed to speak very unconcernedly, with his hand upon his snuff-box, and his keen black eyes scanning the paper before him; but when he looked up there was something in the other's glance which brought the two to a quick understanding.

"There will be many at Belton, as you say, Mr. Rushton. For my part, I could well spare some of them. For a brawling, ignorant, noisy set of fellows, commend me to these horseriders, and I'll wager them against a waterman. Eh, gad, let acquaintance be as old as it will, that's

no reason why its coat should not be brushed or its hair lack powder. As a man of discernment yourself, you will not withhold sympathy. The hungry dogs bark at Belton all day with their cry for news, and their 'respectful this' and their 'most obedient that.' Zounds, sir, the house is not my own, I tell you, with their Dickies and their Bobbies and their Peters and their Jacks—"

The lawyer raised his eyes swiftly.

"Meaning Mr. Danvers of Naseby, I suppose—"

"No other—a big, curly-haired, port-drinking booby that, I verily believe, would pull my nose for a guinea."

"Ay, and for less," thought Lawyer Rushton, adding the reflection that a good pull upon that ill-shaped organ might not be amiss—but to Sir Joseph he said:

"It was Mr. Danvers, I believe, who carried your cousin home after the accident at Yelverton?"

"No other. He carried her as a sack upon the pommel. Zounds, a pretty spectacle for the county! A young woman in

a young man's arms, and she not pledged to him. And what passed between them upon that journey, what passed between them, Mr. Rushton? I would ask you that, sir, as one that knows men, and women too, I 'll wager."

Rushton's face was exceedingly white just when the question was put to him, and his mouth twitched strangely; but he answered banteringly.

"My dear sir, I can give an opinion upon many things — but for a crown case reserved, name a woman to me first. As to what passed between your cousin and Master Danvers of Belton upon any occasion when they found themselves alone, I really do not have the knowledge to pronounce. But remembering that Miss Dene was insensible when we picked her up, and that she was, at the best, very sorely bruised by her fall, I do not think that we need trouble ourselves with anxieties. For my part, it appears to me to be a question of old friendship, of that and nothing more. Do not forget that these young people were children together."

"Ay, and if their will be consulted, they'll have children of their own together by and by. I tell you, sir, she's a fancy for him; and when a woman has a fancy for a man, why, God bless him, or God help him as the case may be. This fox-hunter will marry the lady and come to Belton. I am a prophet before the fact but not before the intention. Mark my words and think of them when May comes."

"I will enter them upon the ledger of my memory, Sir Joseph. Meanwhile, since I presume this prophecy brings you to Harborough, let me ask what part you wish me to play in the matter — what service I can offer?"

Sir Joseph Chetwynd began to let his anger get the better of him.

"You can do much, by counsel, by precept, by plain speaking. I'll have none of it, sir, as I'm a man of honour. What! a fox-hunter in my dead uncle's chair, in a house built for a man of breeding, of discernment, of taste. A pretty sacrilege, upon my life! A lewd, vulgar intrigue that

I'll apply to Chancery to stop. Zounds, if the law has no word to say on that, why, d—n the law, say I, for a snivelling love-sick impostor that would have another man master in my own house."

He brought his cane down upon the table with a crack that shook the snuffers from the candlestick, and made the spectacles dance upon the lawyer's nose. But in one matter Rushton hastened to correct him.

"Your house, I think you said, Sir Joseph —"

"And why not, man, and why not? A full glass is as good as a draught to a thirsty man, all the world over. Would you have it otherwise?"

Rushton took snuff calmly.

"Pardon me," he said; "I was thinking of the law."

"An ugly jade to think of."

"Precisely, but generous withal. The law would say that Belton Abbey is still the fee of Nancy Dene, daughter of Robert Dene, deceased. It would invest the freehold in her on her marriage — a covenant of performance at present incomplete."

"Ay, twaddle on. 'T is the law ever to prate such things, the wise man's part to laugh at them. But I 'll confound you out of your own mouth—'*Qui prior est tempore, potior est jure.*' I 'm in possession, Master Rushton. She 's to live with me, d' ye see. Get this fox-hunter out of the country, and I 'll pay you five hundred guineas when the clock strikes twelve next New Year's Eve. Is it beyond you to do that, man?"

"Quite beyond me, Sir Joseph. Mr. Danvers is my client. Would you have me send him to London on one of the new mail coaches? Truly, sir, an odd proposal from a gentleman."

"Tut, I meant nothing by it. But I 'll have the law of him if he comes upon my land again. Fox-hunter or no fox-hunter, he sha 'n't marry Nance of Belton, as I 'll tell him to his face."

"Nay, be advised of me — tell it to his back, Sir Joseph."

"To his back?"

"For safety's sake — a violent man is my client, and he carries a whip."

Sir Joseph stood up, so angry was he.

"A prudent counsellor, I see."

"A frank one, at least."

"And honest as his kind."

"Knowing a knave when he sees one —"

"Sir, your most obedient servant."

"Sir, your most devoted."

They parted with a mighty show of good behaviour; and Rushton stood upon his doorstep to watch the coach rolling away to Belton. When a turn of the road hid it from his sight, he sent for Morly, his clerk, and gave him certain instructions.

"From this day and every day," he said, "bring me news of Belton Abbey. Let the maids be fee'd and the men given drink at 'The Feathers' — you understand?"

"I venture the opinion that I do, sir."

"Then go about your business, and hold your tongue."

The clerk went to tell the news to Brag, the boy; but the lawyer, sitting alone in his office, said that for a melancholy, mooning, hangdog countenance, the head of George the King upon his snuff-box was not to be beaten that day.

Chapter VIII

A Strange Coach at "The Feathers" Inn

LAWYER RUSHTON was not usually a man of haste, but when he galloped his sturdy cob to the gate of "The Hollies" at Naseby exactly one week after Sir Joseph Chetwynd's coach astonished the good folks of Harborough, he was in a very great hurry indeed; and all that Jerry the groom could do, and all that Jerry the groom could say, would not satisfy his impatience.

"I must see your master at once, Jerry — there is not a moment to lose. Keep the cob upon a pillar rein, for I shall not be five minutes in the house — it is very urgent, very urgent indeed."

Jerry cocked his big ears at the words, and screwed up his little eyes knowingly.

"Ay, lawyer," said he, "but there never was a 'bum' came to Naseby but said the same thing. Ye 'll catch the maister, for he 's just come home from rabbiting, and sweet as new-mown hay, or I don't know him. 'T would be nothing about the hosses, I hope. When a man says 'urgen',' I says, 'hosses or bailiffs.' If 't aint one, it 's t' other, and both 's as bad, to be sure."

Lawyer Rushton did not hear him, for he was already half-way to the house; and presently the ringing stave which followed the master of Naseby everywhere, assured him a profitable visit. Master Jack was at home, true enough, in breeches and boots and an old blue coat — the very type of health, and temper, and idleness, as the lawyer told himself.

Fox in the fallow,
Passun in the plough,
And we 'll all go a-hunting in the morning.

"What! Master Rushton? Ay, the man himself! Come in, my hearty, for the winter winds do blow, dang 'un; they blow the corn out of ye, I 'll warrant.

There could be nothing luckier. We 'll crack a bottle together before we 're a day older."

He led the way to the parlour of the farm, where a great fire roared in the ingle, and a white cloth was laid for dinner, and a black bottle lurked cunningly by the chimney. His hat he had flung already to a corner, and now, with a rough ceremony — which bespoke a truer hospitality from its roughness — he thrust a chair toward the fire, and called loudly for Martha, his housekeeper.

"Clap another fowl down, my wench, and add a bottle to that. We 've company to dinner, ye see — and welcome company, too."

Rushton protested impatiently.

"No, no," he said; "I may not wait, Danvers — though your kindness will. The news I bring will leave little appetite to either of us, I fear. It is news of Miss Dene."

Jack was trying the warmth of his bottle of port at the moment, but the lawyer's tidings nearly sent the bottle from his hand.

"Ay," he cried; "is she — that is to say — come, out with it, man! Dang 'un, is little Nance ill again?"

The lawyer sighed.

"I could almost wish she were."

"Then what ails thee — hast a stone in thy throat?"

"Be a little patient, Danvers. You know that Sir Joseph Chetwynd would give much if his cousin were in London just now?"

"Ay, I 'm no dullard not to know that."

"And that if she were in London she would have few friends?"

"As sure as old Betty on her legs."

"Well, then, what do you think of a strange coach at 'The Feathers'?"

"A strange coach — ecod, what 's that to do with Nance?"

"The very question I put to myself when my clerk brought the news. A strange coach, he said, driven by a vagabond from London they call Tom-the-Rider — a strange coach, mark you! and strange fellows, and talk of Belton Abbey, and particular inquiries as to the mistress.

Couple that to what we have heard of the doings at Belton this month or more — the quarrels and differences, ay, and I fear even a woman's tears, Danvers! — and ask yourself, or rather deduce, what this strange coach, and this fellow who calls himself Tom-the-Rider, are doing at 'The Feathers'?"

Jack Danvers, they say, was very white when he answered Lawyer Rushton.

"Ecod, Lawyer, ye make a man run cold — bide a minute, and I'll be with you on the road."

"One minute I give you, Danvers. There is no such hurry, I think. Joshua Snawley has his instructions. I took the liberty as I came along —"

"Ye did, man? Bless your wise head!"

"Yes, I said to him — an *obiter dictum*, as it were — that if this same Tom-the-Rider were to fancy a little hot spiced wine, the weather being cold, he might even drink at my expense."

Jack looked puzzled.

"What, would ye dose him, man?"

"With the *sal atticum*, Danvers. Let us not inquire too closely into the habits

and customs of innkeepers. But, *verbum sap.*, if this man, having taken the wine which Joshua Snawley vends, should sleep upon it, I verily believe there are rogues at 'The Feathers' who would search his pockets."

"The devil there are!"

"And, having searched his pockets, would hand the letters to any friend of mine that cared to ride to Belton for its mistress's sake. I wish, indeed, Danvers, that I did not wear a lawyer's coat to-day; for how shall the law stoop? — it might be to the horse-pond, it might be to the parish pump. *Hodie tibi, cras mihi,* let us invert the old adage. What the statute can do, shall be done by me to-morrow; but what the water can do, may be done by others to-day. You take my meaning, lad?"

Jack was as one on fire.

"Ho, Jerry!" he cried, running from the room to the stables; "my horse, you lout, my horse!"

But the face of George the King had a merry eye that day.

Chapter IX

Tom-the-Rider makes new Friends

MASTER SHENSTONE, as Parson Dallas often would remind Joshua Snawley, declared that a man ever would find his warmest welcome at an inn; and, that being so, "The Feathers" owed a debt of hospitality and genial comfort to all that rode by its friendly doors. To give him his due, the said Snawley was never one to forget his part in life or the reputation which his good house wore for the best ale in all Northamptonshire and the sauciest maids, and the very prettiest kitchen wherein a weary man might consume his nectar and as much honest beef as his stomach desired. A bustling place it was, with trim stable-yards and cunning old passages that led to nowhere, and

tilted gables which spoke of a hundred years ago, and bright faces and leather breeches everywhere. Home!—why it was home to catch a glimpse of the lights in its windows when you were a mile away on a dead-beat horse, as Quick the groom bore witness. An odd sort of a man that would be who asked more of life than a seat in the ingle of the kitchen, and Jane, the black-eyed wench, to carry him a tankard, and old Snawley, mine host, to give him the latest gossip, ay, and to make gossip, too, when the need was. At least, it was so said by the friends of "The Feathers;" and all agreed that for a well-kept, generous hostelry there was none to beat it in the three kingdoms. Peaceful, however, as the life at "The Feathers" was upon any day of the week you might choose to name (save only at the seasons of fairs), the afternoon which brought to its doors Tom-the-Rider and another, a little rogue of a man in a long shabby coat and a rusted beaver hat, found much unwonted stir in the usually orderly kitchen, and not a few calls for hot brandy negus

to be served by Miss Snawley, who ruled the precincts of the bar, and added a silk dress of undoubted quality to a pair of bewitching eyes, which were capable of expressing either intense devotion to her calling or to her customer, as the need might be. It was odd, in truth, how many friends of "The Feathers" took their way to the old kitchen on that particular day. Certainly, Morly, the clerk, was there, and Brag, Lawyer Rushton's boy (who was permitted one glass of rum-shrub and no more), and Quick the groom from the Abbey; and once, at the height of the day, Master Rushton himself, who had a word with host Snawley and then rode off toward Naseby and the marsh. Some, perchance, would have set it down to the wit of the stranger, that dandified rogue who came in the old black coach, with his talk of other countries, and of horses that he had seen and ridden in the Americas, and of the wars there, and the part he had played in them; and something of his friendship for Sir Joseph Chetwynd — whose particular business he came upon.

Nay, it was a smooth tongue altogether; and to all that it said, the little fellow in the beaver hat would echo, "That 's right, Tom," "Oh, you know a thing or two, Tom!" or, "Gadzooks, Tom, it was just like that." He could drink hot brandy at a gulp, that little man in the beaver hat, and often he showed them the trick of it. But the other fellow stuck to negus, and right well old Snawley ladled it into his glass.

"As I was saying, gentlemen, you have no hosses in these parts — is that a truth, friend Raker, or is it not? They have no hosses in these parts — only, so to speak, the shape of a beast which the Lord intended to be a hoss. You agree with that, Raker?"

Raker, the little man in the beaver hat, gulped down his brandy and said that he agreed.

"Not a hoss, Tom, not a hoss have I clapped my eyes upon this day."

"Gentlemen, the point is made. You have no hosses, but you have pretty fellows upon them. Odso, I knew a hoss in Vir-

ginia — eh, Raker, did I know a hoss in Virginia, or did I not?"

"That's right, Tom, it was just like that."

"You see, gentlemen, Raker remembers him, too — the devil of a hoss, gentlemen. Up, death and destruction, you could have played the game of tennis with him when he had the fancy to put his head between his legs — eh, Raker, when he had his head between his legs, I say?"

"Ay, Tom, when he had his head 'twixt his legs, it was just like that, Tom."

"Is there a man in these parts could have sat a hoss like that, Raker?"

"That man has yet to be foaled, Tom."

"Then I'll trouble yonder short gentleman to give me another glass of his negus. Zounds, it goes to the very depths, as good wine should. Your servant, gentlemen. When you visit the Americas name Tom-the-Rider, and you may swim in their liquor, confound me, for next to nothing at all. Odso, have I truth in my mouth, Raker?"

"Ye have truth in your mouth, Tom —

for next to nothing at all, confound me."

Whatever Tom-the-Rider might have had in his mouth, it was perfectly plain that all who listened to this flash couple had wonder and awe in theirs, which made them the willing servants of the strangers, who were driving through Harborough "on a matter connected with the Americas, gentlemen, as I live." For a full hour the long man talked and the short man said "That's so, Tom," until at last, what with the wine and the warmth and the very great fatigue of the narration, the long one went to sleep upon the right hand side of the kitchen chair, and the short one upon the left. And this was an act of Providence, as host Snawley said — for who should ride up to the door of "The Feathers" at that very moment but Master Danvers from Naseby, and with him the two good friends that were never long out of his sight.

"Do they bide still in the house, Snawley?"

"Ay, surely, Mister Danvers, as fast

asleep as your honour in sermon-time, axing Mr. Dallas's pardon. But they do sleep uncommon heavy, to be sure — "

Jack dismounted and handed his reins to Quick, the groom.

" Is Miss Nance keeping better, Quick ? "

" Well, nicely, thank you, sir — but, Lord, that white and changed ! She have looked for you once or twice at the Abbey, Mister Danvers."

Jack flushed like a girl.

" You 've company there, Quick, and I 've no fancy for new faces. Ecod, by all accounts, ye 've too much company."

" There's one we could spare, Master Danvers. 'T would n't be me that saw *him* if he fell in Cottesbrook, I do assure 'ee. And what 's this coach at 'The Feathers' for ? Ay, ask yourself that, Master Danvers. There be lawyer's clerk Morly, spelling out the writing we took from long chap's pocket. Baint no good to no one, say I. What 's strange writing to do at all in these parts ? "

" Ay, what 's writing to do with any one that 's honest ? " chimed in Bobby

Bellars, the Squire of Barton. "Show me a quill and I'll show you a rogue. Did these fellows talk of going to the Abbey, Quick?"

"They talked of nobut, sir, save as we had no hosses in these parts, and they knew some wonderful fine hosses out in 'Meriky, to be sure."

"Rogues from the Fleet, I'll warrant," said Dicky Dallas; "let's have a look at their horses to begin with, Quick."

Jack flicked his whip across his thigh.

"A pretty notion, Dicky; let's see how they can gallop down the road."

Old Quick shook his head protestingly.

"But ye would n't turn their hosses away, gentlemen."

"Dang 'un, but I would, Quick. Do ye want your mistress to be in London town, God knows where, this time to-morrow?"

"Lord, sir, you don't say that. Why I, damn 'em, I'd strangle 'em if I thought that."

"Well, go and get their horses. We have none in these parts, you know. Let 'em whistle a pair from Virginia, the toads!"

Quick, full of fear for his mistress's sake, went to the stables at a trot, and assisted by Toby, the ostler at "The Feathers," he returned presently with a weedy pair of ill-conditioned nags that once had figured in the horse races at Newmarket, but were now to be valued at as many guineas as they had legs — a high price if Ostler Toby was to be believed.

"These be the hosses from 'Meriky, gentlemen. Lord, I'd make a better one out of sealing-wax, I would."

"Let 's see their paces, Quick. Crack your whip, man, crack your whip!"

The sorry nags, released from the groom's hand, trotted slowly down the road to Northampton; but Dicky's horse, Bravo, was still at the inn door, and Jack Danvers sprang lightly to the saddle, and cantered away after the others. Those before "The Feathers" could hear his hunting thong cracking like a pistol long after he disappeared from their sight, and when he came back his face was all hot with his exertion.

"They're half way to London by this time, boys — let's go in and hear what Clerk Morly has to say."

Clerk Morly was found in the parlour of the inn, with Brag the boy, and Snawley and his daughter, all clustered about a candle which helped them to read the papers they had taken from the long man's pocket. Very knowingly mine host sifted the fragments of gossip which the clerk tossed to him, and, in his turn, was often rebuked by his daughter, whose "Law, pa!" could always silence that valiant man.

"Come from Lunnon, Master Danvers, they have — there's the *Morning Chronicle* on 'em, and what honest man goes about with such like, I 'd ask ye."

"A devilish suspicious circumstance, Snawley," said Bobby Bellars.

"Ay, it is that too," cried Jack Danvers, "was there aught else, Morly?"

Morly looked up over his gold-rimmed glasses.

"A letter to Sir Joseph Chetwynd in the French tongue, Mister Danvers. Now,

what are we to think of a letter in the French tongue? I venture to submit that it gives us a right to pursue our inquiries. Here is what appear to me to be a writ of attachment, *fieri facias* — with your leave I will state the clauses of it."

Jack Danvers stamped his foot angrily.

"I'll have none of it!" cried he. "Ecod, give me execution first and judgment afterwards. Had they money on them?"

"The matter of four guineas — or, to be precise, three pounds eighteen shillings sterling."

"Then 't will just pay host Snawley's bill — put it in the till, Annie, my dear, and tell any one who asks for me that I'm up at Farmer Robb's pond to see two gentlemen off to London."

Miss Snawley, whose kindliest admirers could not altogether deny that one eye was not always ready to follow the lead of the other, squinted unmistakably when she said, "Law, Mister Danvers, how obliging of you?" but she put the money into the till all the same, while her papa cried:

"That 's right, Annie, always do what the gentlemen tell you."

Master Jack Danvers himself was, by this time, in the kitchen, whither Bobby Bellars and Dicky Dallas followed him on tiptoe, and even Quick the groom, and Brag the boy, in the expectation of seeing something which a man might not hope to see every day. Morly, the clerk, alone remained in the parlour with Miss Snawley, to read the writ of *fieri facias*, and to repeat the clauses of it with unction. From this task he was recalled by the first ripple of laughter which attended all Mister Danvers's proposals.

"Ecod, they came in a coach, boys, and in a coach they shall go. Give me a hand with the long fellow, Bobby, and we 'll pop him on the roof, for he needs fresh air by the look of him. You, Quick, clap the beaver hat over the little rat's eyes and let's see how he 'll look in the dickey. A precious pair of rogues as ever I came across. We 'll bed 'em in old Robb's pond and hear the arguments to-morrow. One, two, three, and up with him, boys!"

"I do believe," exclaimed Morly in the parlour, "that Master Danvers means to do it!"

"Law, Master Morly, what things you think of!"

"Certainly, the evidence is so to be interpreted," continued the clerk, going to the window whence you could overlook the stable-yard; "they are carrying the gentleman in the long coat to the coach he came in, and putting him on the top thereof. His companion, the *fidus Achates*, as my master would construe it, is now being led to the dickey by your ostler, Toby. Let us be discreet, Miss Snawley. This may lead *usque ad judicem*. We must know nothing of it; we must be able to declare, of our own knowledge and vision, that no such thing happened here. By all that 's plausible, Miss Snawley, did you mix me a glass of brandy and water at this moment, I could, *circumstantio et particularibus*, pledge my honour on the venture."

Miss Snawley had a short way with "spoil-sports" and cowards.

"Get away with you — nonsense," said she; "I want to see the gentlemen."

It was a worthy desire, despite the fact that the gentlemen were then indulging in a very unusual occupation; for what should Bobby Bellars and Dicky Dallas be doing but dragging the strange coach from "The Feathers" yard; while Master Jack himself was pushing it behind, and Toby the ostler heaving one wheel, and Quick the groom heaving the other; and all together crying, "Up, boys, up!" or "There she goes!" or "Now for it!" with other similar and encouraging exclamations. The last that Miss Snawley saw of the coach was its dickey with the little man in the beaver hat sleeping there for all the world like a "new born babe" as Morly ventured — only to be told — "Law, Mister Morly, what things you think of." It was an hour later and full dark, when those who had gone away upon an errand so strange returned to the parlour to call for hot wine and to laugh until the rafters rang.

"And I do believe," said Master Morly,

philosophically, "that those gentlemen have left that coach in the very middle of old Robb's pond."

. . . . .

The cold grey light of dawn was in the sky when Tom-the-Rider awoke from the heavy sleep into which host Snawley's negus had plunged him. Stars yet lagged in the open heavens; a bitter wind of March stirred the trees moaningly; there was a ripple upon the dark water of the pond as of a bird's plumage ruffled by the storm. But where Tom-the-Rider was, or how he got there, or by what means he should go hence, that flash personage desired to be thrice confounded if he could tell.

"Raker, you hear me — where the devil are you, Raker?"

Raker, fast asleep in the dickey, awoke with a start, and stared about him stupidly.

"Eyes and limbs of me, Tom, but it's just so. Where the devil are we?"

Tom-the-Rider sat up to make sure that he was not dreaming.

"Dragging the strange coach from 'The Feathers' yard"

"Wings of a boiled rabbit!" cried he; "we're in a pond, Raker!"

"Ha, you know a thing or two, Tom. A pond it is, by Jericho."

"And the hosses broken away, Raker."

"And the hosses broken away, Tom?"

Tom-the-Rider scratched his head.

"Can I drive a hoss, or can't I drive a hoss, Raker. Will you answer me that?"

"Ye 've truth in your mouth, Tom; you can drive a hoss."

"Then, lightning burn my boots, how came I in a pond?"

"Ah, that's it, Tom; how came you in a pond! Why, ye druv in it, Tom."

Tom shook his head. It was too much for him.

"By the living Jingo," said he, "I must have druv in it, Raker!"

"But ye won't drive out, Tom; ye've no hosses."

"For a pair of hacked, spavined, lousy glander boys, name the two we drove from London, Raker. And it appears I am on the top of the coach."

"It do appear so, Master Tom."

Tom shivered, for the wind blew cold.

"I 'll go for an acrobat, Raker; a 'jongleur,' as the French say. Body of a thief; but I 'm a living wonder, Raker!"

"A living wonder, Tom."

"And last night I slept at — death and darkness, where did I sleep last night, Raker?"

The little man in the beaver hat would answer no more questions.

"What did I tell you, Tom? Get your guineas first, and eat your supper afterwards. Now, it 's my opinion we took something to drink last night."

"True, oh prophet; something to drink and a head like you bring home from Ranelagh after Mr. Handel's fireworks."

"Nay, Tom, he makes the music, not the fireworks."

"Then, strike the loud lyre, I wish he 'd make some now. Who goeth — as my Sarah would cry at Drury Lane — who goeth upon yonder bank? A man or his shadow, forsooth?"

"A man, Tom; what eyes you have!"

"Then break my heart, but we will

touch his sentiment. What ho! without there; do you see us, Blockhead?"

From the far side of the pool came the voice of Quick the groom.

"Surely I do see 'ee, varmints."

"Then hurry to the nearest house and demand, in the name of two gentlemen from London, horses for their coach upon the instant."

"We've no hosses in these parts; ye said so yourself yesterday."

"Eh gad; a real man, Raker. Then where was I yesterday?"

"Ah, we'd like to know that, Tom. Where did we lie yesterday?"

"Put not my head to torture. I'll even promise him gratuity — a wherewithal to drink, as the French tongue sayeth. 'You, fellow, a guinea, if you bring me horses!'"

"Show me your brass, gentlemen?"

Tom-the-Rider felt in his pockets, first in the pocket upon his right-hand side, then in the pocket upon his left-hand side, and after that in all his pockets on all the sides of him, once, twice, three times.

"Curse me if I've a scudo," said he, in dismay.

"For my part, not a confounded shiner," cried Raker.

"I 'll give you the word of a gentleman," roared Tom to Quick upon the bank.

"Then wrap it up in paper, for 't is easily broke," cried Quick, in his turn.

"But you would n't leave us in the water, fellow?"

"Ecod, and I would, and make ye no charge at all."

"A low hound, Raker."

"A very low hound, Tom."

"He 's going away."

"And whistling moreover."

"I 'd lay my whip across his shoulders for a shilling, Raker."

"But you have n't got one, Tom."

"True, true, my philosopher. And I perish. Oh, unholy day that cast me out upon these shores!"

"To drive a wench to London. You 'll not drive her now, Tom?"

"Sink her in fathomless seas, she has brought me to this watery grave."

"But you 'll swim ashore, Tom."

"Now, the devil! How these thoughts do come! 'T will be very cold, Raker."

"And muddy withal."

"And the inn distant, I 'll wager."

"And no money in your breeches, Tom."

"Nevertheless my boy, I venture it, I venture it. There is a great gulf fixed, and beyond it hot negus. Give me your hand, Raker. The stars of the firmament are very numerous; this night's amusement hath added others. Behold! I descend to the depths — frost and ice — I am touched to the marrow."

"'T is not above your chin, Tom."

"'T is not above my chin, Raker."

"Then douse me if I don't follow you!"

Upon which, as Quick would tell you, Tom-the-Rider and Raker, his man, descended to the water, and with oaths which might have made the trees to stumble, they splashed and billowed and wallowed through Farmer Robb's pond to the distant bank, and then lay still, gurgling in their distress.

"Wrap me up in dust and write my

bill, Raker. I am no more for this terrestrial sphere."

"Nay, Tom, you're for London town, and quick about it, too. What, would die of a fever?"

"Nay, of hot spiced wine, full to the brim, good measure, overflowing. The thought gives me wings. I run, Raker, I run."

And run they did, says old Quick, away from the village to an unknown destination which none cared to seek out, because all remembered that the night and the morning thereafter had wrought a great work for pretty Nance of Belton; and for her the meanest would have laughed, even at those laws which Morly the clerk could quote so glibly.

Chapter X

Wherein there is Bad News of Old Mulberry

WHATEVER Sir Joseph Chetwynd knew of the purpose which sent Tom-the-Rider and Raker, his man, to Northamptonshire, it is quite certain that he opened his lips to nobody upon that subject, and, indeed, behaved with such discretion that even Lawyer Rushton would have been sore pressed to lay any charge at his door. Ready tongues, it is true, put it abroad in after years that the intention was to carry Nance of Belton to some house in London, and there to keep her close hid until the year was up and the Abbey passed by deed and testament to the heir the late Robert Dene had willed for it. But of this there was no valid

proof either in the men's papers, or in that which subsequently could be learned of them; so that even the lawyer came to think that they might have been no more than flash fellows from the race-courses who had some right of intimacy with the new master of Belton, and had journeyed to Northampton to claim it. In which opinion, their hasty flight from the county and the subsequent equanimity of Sir Joseph Chetwynd supported Mr. Rushton; for it was beyond disputation that the baronet grew more masterful every day, and would not even hear of any chance which might deprive him of his conditional heritage. To Belton had he come when it was plain to him that the mistress of Belton had no mind for any of her neighbours' sons, and would look beyond the county for a husband. Eight months remained to her, he said, in which to cheat him of his rich estate. If she found no man by the first day of the next year, the fee became vested in the nephew, and not in the daughter of the late Robert Dene. That it should be so vested

to perpetuity was now the one waking purpose of Sir Joseph Chetwynd's life.

It is possible that a clever man, with a nice discernment of a woman's will, and some skill in ministering to her vanities, might have steered this difficult course with profit and success; but Sir Joseph Chetwynd, to his cost, had but little of those arts which win upon a woman's favour, save alone his town manners, which Nance was quick to mimic and to scoff at. The dulness of his mind was remarkable for one so schooled by travel and education. He had begun the day of his intrigue with a quarrel, and with quarrels he pursued it. Nance's mishap at Yelverton, which would have touched any other to pity and solace, proved for him but a new opportunity, and one, he said, sent surely by Providence for his success. With the mistress of the Abbey prisoned upstairs, the house below was at his own command; his mastership unquestioned. All alike now began to know the stings of that biting tongue, to find the true man behind the mask of vain

civility and professed benevolence. When the surgeons permitted Nance to come down to the garden again, she found all things changed, the unwelcome emblems of the new reign everywhere. Old servants obeyed her timidly at the risk of their places; it was "Sir Joseph says," and "Sir Joseph wishes," and "by Sir Joseph's order" from every one. Even old Jacintha, who once had been the meekest of dependents, could muster courage now to wrestle with her niece and to withstand her.

"Such a proper man, child; such a master for Belton! My word, we needed him, I vow! 'T is order, order, order all about the house, and such gentility that even the grooms are mending their noisy ways. See that you do not offend your cousin by any temper, my dear, for he is not a man to be won that way."

"If he wait for my mood, he will not be won until the Judgment, Aunt. Nay, I like the noisy ways, and as for my tempers, I got them from my father, and will even keep my heritage. Let Sir

Joseph go to London if they offend him; I, at least, do not ask him to be offended at Belton."

Aunt Jacintha shook her head sadly.

"I vow, child, it is you who will go to London if you do not find discretion. Remember, Sir Joseph is old enough to be your father, and what he knows, my dear, ah, what he knows!"

"I care that for his knowledge, Aunt. Let him bide at Belton, and I will even teach him something yet. What, being old enough to be the father, he would wed the daughter. Faugh, a vain dandy that has not the sense of my horse Mulberry! I'll have none of him, and if my will can do it, he shall have none of Belton, I promise you, though I go to the altar with Quick the groom. What say you, Aunt; would you know me for Mrs. Quick? 'T would be a pretty match, I vow, and a better man than your nephew for all his gentility. Nay, I 'll think of it, 'Mrs. Quick, your servant, madame, my good man is round with the hosses, but will take a dish of tea presently.' 'T is within the

laws, Aunt Jacintha, as you may learn if you provoke me."

Old Jacintha, upon such an outburst as this, could do no more than call upon high Heaven to forgive the sins of her erring child; but Nance would flounce away to the stables, and there seek of her horses that affection and understanding which men denied to her. Boldly as she carried herself in the house, the bitterness of the position in which her father's will had placed her was more sure every day, and every day she realised more truly the ultimate obligations it might entail upon her. But deeper still and closer to her heart was the confession that the one man in all England who could turn this tide of trouble had no will to speak the word by which it might be turned. Never had suitor such an opportunity to win a woman's love as Jack Danvers when he carried her to Yelverton. Sore hurt in body and in mind she had turned to him, as to a kinsman, for pity of her hurt, and some salve upon her wounded vanities; and while this had not been withheld, that

more intimate confession, which might have lifted the cloud of her distress and permitted her to see the sun of her hope beyond, had remained unspoken. Jack loved her, she told herself for consolation, but his love would remain locked away from the light as some treasure which may not be heard of lest others should laugh at the boast. In a merrier mood, she said that old Slim would not stumble a second time to give a tongue-tied Corydon his opportunity. Jack had let his chance slip, and never, perchance, would it come again. And yet she knew there were few more worthy of her, few in all England as true of heart and honest of mind as Jack of Naseby. He was one of nature's rough diamonds, she said, a man with all his faults that had never known shame — or fear — a true son of those whose courage had made England great.

But Jack's silence had been a sore mishap, a heavy blow to her pride; and the new master of Belton did not forget to plague her every day with his ill-mannered observations and his contempt for her

amusements. She answered them, as became her, with a clever tongue, and a wit for wit which mightily astounded Sir Joseph Chetwynd. No day passed but one of these outbursts could send her, white and angry, to the stables, there to tell her troubles to her silent friends.

"A fox-hunter is like a ball that children play with, little cousin," said Sir Joseph, on the morning of that day. "Throw him upon his head, and he 'll bounce to your hand again. Nay, there's nothing in it, nothing in his skull, Nance. And *ex nihilo nihil fit*, as the Latin authors tell us. Keep better company, child. If a man be known by his friends, surely shall a woman be known by her pleasures. Yours, I see, are set upon wild beasts —"

"Because I have known men, sir.. A horse has no tongue to deride those amusements for which he has not the heart and the courage. Oh, I prefer a horse any day, for he will go where I will, and he has but to hear my voice to be my true servant. Ay, there you have it. He knows his own stable, and does not seek

another. He is gentle, sir, and does not loiter with his back to the fire to abuse his neighbour's friends. Nay, a horse can be very pretty, sir, and you'll admit there are men of whom you cannot say as much."

"Oh, I'll admit anything, cousin, if thereby I can keep my little Nance safe and sound at Belton. Was it my will that, let us say, a clumsy horse flung her so roughly at Yelverton that her good aunt must watch at her bedside for a week, and all the county cry on me for permitting so little skill to court such great disasters. Nay, child, a woman's folly goes faster than her courage. Credit something to older heads that would think for you, ay, and act for you, to your profit, as you will presently discover."

"Your consideration overwhelms me, cousin. A woman's folly goes fast, as you say, but it may even outrun a man's desires. As for my poor skill, well, it must withstand the assaults of Master No-Skill, and laugh at them. Indeed, your older heads do not please me, sir. I mislike the sound of them. Full they may be, but

not so full that when you shake them they shall rattle. Nay, cousin, prove it not to me, for I want no music this day. I go to the wild beasts, who show me greater kindness than the tame ones. If you weary of the house, there will always be a corner in my stables for you."

She left him with the thrust, and went off, as was her wont, to the stableyard and her good friends there. The morning was a sunny one of April; perfume of violets and the gillyflowers, of musk, and thyme, and rosemary was breathed in the cool air; the sweet scents of an old-world garden told of the awakening spring and the riper glory of the year. Everywhere it was her own Belton, and yet how changed! Even the stables harboured strange men, who welcomed her sullenly. Only Quick the groom remained to recall the days of old time when the Abbey had been hers indeed, and none had questioned her generous authority.

"I do be afeared almost to see 'ee this morning, miss," said old Quick, with a very doleful shake of his little round head.

"'T ain't Belton, surely, for me to be carrying messages to its mistress from a lawyer's man, and him no so good, as you could n't buy a better at fair times. Yes, 't was Morly, the clerk, spoke the word. 'Tell your lady,' says he, and I 'll warrant Mister Rushton put it into his mouth, 'tell your lady that when she 's a fancy to see the sights of London town, we know a road that will carry her there in good company — ay, and let her think of it this day,' says he, 'for I do surmise she 'll lack the horses if she lingers at Belton yet a while.' Strange talk, mistress, and axin' your pardon, Master Morly he do surmise too much to my liking."

Nance would have passed this warning by for idle gossip had she not remembered that Lawyer Rushton was her friend, and she was wise enough to know that if this counsel did indeed come from him, she must not despise it. Very meaningless it was to her as it fell from the lips of the old groom, but when Quick continued his story, she knew that she had done well to hearken to him.

"Why should I lack horses for any journey, Quick — have I not three in my stables?"

Quick stood first upon one leg, then upon the other. He scratched his head, took a straw from his mouth two or three times, made a pretence of picking up a bucket, and then blurted out the grievous news.

"Ay, ye had three, mistress, afore ye was took to your bed."

The colour came to Nance's cheeks, a hot temper made the blood to sing in her ears.

"What do you mean, Quick — has any one dared —"

"To sell old Mulberry — yes, they've sold him, miss, sure enough."

He looked away, for his heart was heavy; but the sound as of a child sobbing made him turn again to see a little head bent low against the stable door, and to wish with all his soul that he had not lived the day when Mistress Nance of Belton, should so stand before him. "Ay," he said afterwards, "it cut me like a knife, and God

"The sound as of a child sobbing made him turn again"

help him if he'd come into the yard when Bob Quick was there!"

"Come, mistress, we all have our troubles. And old Mulberry's not gone far, neither. Who d'ye think bought 'ee, miss?"

"I don't know, and I don't care, Quick."

"Ay, but I do, mistress. 'T was Lawyer Rushton, and no other. The old hoss 'll be well enough up at his yard, miss. Why, trust a 'torney. He 'll dingle his oats out of some one, and 't won't be much he 'll pay for 'un. Don't you fear for 'un, mistress. There 'll be warm straw for Mulberry if some one's clapped in prison for it."

Nance laughed through her tears.

"Oh, I have some friends; they have not all forsaken me. But I shall go away from here, Quick; I shall go — God knows where I shall go."

"Then I will go with 'ee, mistress, if 't was to the bottom of the world, though, surely, passun do say as it 's round; and as some of us be a standin' upon other people's heads — which is awkerd if they know'd

of it, as I don't suppose they do unless it 's a making Gibiway injuns of 'em — the same being fearsome kinds of varmints, miss, and a good wearin' colour if so be as you 're fond of black browns. Yet, don't you think as we 're a going to them parts unlooked for, mistress, because that ain't to be while Sir Joseph has his puppy dogs here and his puppy dogs there, and all ready to bark if a man do lift a finger. The place is full of 'em, like rats in a barn. 'T will be a clever hoss as rides through them by daylight; yet I don't misdoubt as night might do it — night and them as was willing. There 's one here you can reckon on, come day or night; Sir Joseph or no Sir Joseph, 't is all the same to me, miss, as only waits the word if there was a hunerd of 'em."

Nance was very thoughtful now.

"When was Mulberry sold, Quick?" she asked.

"The second week as you was took with the misfortune, lady."

"And Slim?"

"They 've turned 'ee to grass, miss."

"The cowards; but you cannot believe they would watch me."

"Ay, and more than me, miss; there's others believe it — Lawyer Rushton, for one. 'Tell her for me,' says he, 'that the day she finds the door of her house shut — meaning you, miss — I know a coach that will carry her to Harborough before the clock strikes three.' Trust a lawyer for surmisin' summat. There ain't nothing, I do declare, as a lawyer can't surmise when he 's a mind to it. He know'd as Sir Joseph did n't want you to leave the Abbey, miss — ay, afore I know'd it or any of us know'd it. He 's a head of his own, has Lawyer Rushton. You take warning of 'ee, mistress, for he 's as clever as many a hoss, and that 's what you can say of few human critturs."

Nance heard no more, but ran back to the house frightened and hurt as she had never been in all her life. To her childish imagination it seemed that some great conspiracy against her happiness, perhaps even against her very liberty, was afoot in that home of hers, and that it was a

conspiracy which she must face alone, with all the wit and all the courage God had given her.

For how, she asked, could she seek help of Lawyer Rushton unless she were willing to answer as he wished that one question which was ever on his lips — to say to him, "Save Belton, and I will be your wife"? She knew that she could not answer it, for never could her heart be in the words, and never could she utter them save to him who might have heard them years ago had he but read a woman truly.

And for Jack's sake now she would hold her peace and stand alone before them all.

Chapter XI

Nance finds new Friends

BELTON ABBEY was early to bed, as all good houses were when night was for the watchdogs and the highwaymen, and none but a laggard would lose the first fresh hours of day. Not a light could you see in all the Abbey windows, save it were a rushlight, when ten o'clock had struck, and even the last of the grooms had come up from "The Feathers," or in from the barns where the courting was done. For the matter of that, the day was over when the maids carried the lamps and the tea-tray to the great oak dining-room where old Jacintha would play a game of piquet with Sir Joseph Chetwynd, while Nance would go off to her own room to be alone with her trou-

bles and the thoughts which plagued her. None missed her or asked for her at such hours. She, in turn, sought no company nor other amusements than her own skill provided. A clever player upon the harpsichord, not unready with her paint-brushes, very given to the reading of the lighter books, the works of Mr. Addison and of poor Goldsmith, with Mr. Richardson's novels and the entertaining writings of Daniel Defoe, the hours passed all swiftly, so that, winter or summer, there were no lagging days, no seasons when she might complain of the rural life or of its monotony. But ten o'clock found her, as habit taught, ever ready for her bed, and for that refreshing sleep which only youth may win. She could number upon the fingers of a hand the occasions in any year when such a sober practice was forgotten; but of all the days thus remembered none stood, until her life's end, so clear in her recollection as the one which carried her from Belton, she knew not whither or to what new home.

Quick the groom had been in the lane

which lies by the Italian garden (as all the world knows) since nine o'clock, waiting with two horses that were tethered inside the orchard gate; but it was full ten before he saw a figure upon the high road, and went a little way to meet it for prudence' sake.

"It 's her; no 't aint; yes, it be! Dang 'un, I can't see for the shadders. But it 's mistress, right enough. Ecod, if 't were t'other! That would be a pretty go, Bob Quick — nay, 't is nobut a boy after all."

He went to turn away as a boyish figure came out of the shadows and crept stealthily toward him. One of the stable lads, he said, out to meet a wench. Then he heard his name called, and that, as he confessed, was like a bit of cold iron on the back.

"Quick, Quick, where are you, Quick?"

"The Lord be good to me this night, if it 's not mistress after all."

"Oh, Quick, don't tell people. I 'm sure they 're watching me. Do you remember these clothes, Quick — they were brother Richard's."

Quick stared at her as though the very latest and most fashionable ghost had come out of Belton to change a word with him. The voice was the voice of Nance of Belton, but the coat and the breeches were those of her brother Richard, who had been killed at Tangore five years before that unhappy day.

"Well," thought Quick, "she always were a daredevil—but this is summat as do take the very breath away." But to her he said, "Ay, they 'll not know ye like that, miss. Don't you be afeard as any one 'll see you; we 'll be at the cottage afore midnight, and my old mother, breeches or no breeches, 't is all the same to the likes of her, for she 's blind. I do hope as you feel better this night, miss."

"I don't know how I feel, Quick. My head 's in a whirl. I shall never see Belton again, never! never! They are taking it away from me—oh, Quick, I wish I were dead!"

Quick coughed two or three times and was very busy taking up old Slim's girths.

"Don't 'ee say that, miss. Lunnon 's

a mighty big place they do tell me; ay, as big as Harborough an' two more atop of it. Ye'll find young gentlemen there as will have something to say to old Economy inside, I do warrant me. Wait till we go to your folk and tell 'em the story. They'll put the law on him, miss, as sure as black ain't white. And when the law's got a man, it don't do for 'ee to say ''conomy,' miss, 'cause ''conomy' ain't worth the price of a old fiddle, to be sure. You give me your hand, miss — Lud, 't is your own brother come back from the wars."

Nance took heart of his encouragement.

"I shall go to Lady Foley and tell her my story, Quick. She is my mother's kinswoman, a selfish old thing that loses all her money at the play and beats her servants. But it will be better than nowhere, and I can't stop here. Oh, I hate to leave it; I hate to leave the woods and the garden — and — and — and all the things I love."

If her heart had spoken, she would have said "and Jack, who loves me;" but her heart was very silent that night, and in

silence she rode away from the home of her childhood and from the man who had made himself her jailer. The vaguest purpose was in her head as she went; nothing more than the desire to flee the place and the peril there. She would go to London to the house of her kinswoman, Lady Foley — the horrid old thing who was always at church when she was not at play; and there she would seek a new home until such time as the worst had befallen and Belton had passed forever to another. There were eight months yet, Nance said, eight months wherein to undo that which her father had done so maladroitly. Kindly hope whispered to her that she might well find a lover in eight months, a lover from London town, who would ride back with her to Belton and say, "Here I bring my wife to her own again." But that was a voice to which she would not listen, for Jack was over there by Naseby Marsh, and never, perchance, in all her life would she go hunting with him again. She was very sure of this at the moment, and all sorts of

troublesome fellows, shadows of her imagination, came following after as she turned from the familiar scenes to the darkness of that night of April. Rash she had been, rash and headstrong and impatient. There was a certain recompense of her adventure now that she was set out upon it; and she rode by and by with a new delight in that silent hour and in the scenes it opened to her eyes. All said and done, she was going to a new world, the greater world of London, where a thousand fine figures would caper on her stage, and she would read the book of life as she had never read it in the seclusion of her rural home. Freedom and the truths of freedom beckoned her on encouragingly. What mattered it that she had few friends or little money in her purse. A pretty woman, as Sir Joseph Chetwynd told her every day, could choose her friends where she pleased and when she pleased. He, at least, would learn to-morrow that her choice did not include the new master of Belton, and that his dominion over her was already a thing of the past. For the rest,

she would leave her fate to destiny, and to the faithful fellow who had sacrificed all that he might go out with her in her trouble. Quick, in truth, was her salvation that night. Straight as a line upon the paper she rode to his mother's house, which lay not three miles from Kettering town. Nor did she fear pursuit so soon as her horse could feel the good grass under him, and the rising moon showed her the safer way, where Sir Joseph Chetwynd, at least, would have neither the will nor the courage to follow her.

"They will never overtake us, Quick; there is not a horse in the stable which could catch old Slim if I spoke the word."

"Nor this bit of a cob, neither, miss, if I gave the devil his head — a-axing your pardon for mentioning of it. 'T is lawyer Rushton's cob, as you 'll see when the cloud passes."

Nance looked down at the gallant cob and recognized him for the one the lawyer had ridden when she had met him upon the road to Harborough — the day that Sir Joseph Chetwynd came to Belton.

"I remember him, Quick," she said; "the little black horse he named after me. Mr. Rushton knew of my intention, then?"

"Ay, trust a lawyer to see the coach afore it's over the hill, miss. He knawed time enough. 'She 'll be off to London, by and by,' says he, and says I, 'Well, you do surprise me, Mr. Rushton.' 'And she 'll want a horse, likely,' says he, and says I, 'T will be me that must walk to that same town, lawyer — this very night,' says I. 'Oh,' says he, 'you don't say that, do you?' and says I, 'Mum's the word,' and he took it, miss, and what should happen but that very cob came down our very lane at seven o'clock to-night, and not a soul up at the house knew anything about it. Wunnerful, say I, as you 'll admit."

Nance laughed at his oddity and turned the question.

"They are all very good to me, Quick — and you! oh, I shall never forget to-night! Is your mother's house far off, Quick?"

"Turn yonder spinney and I'll show you the lights of it. Ay, she's a good 'un is my old mother — there ain't another like her in England, if so be as it ain't my mistress. But she'll be wunnerful surprised when we do ride in, sureli."

Nance looked down at the graceful limbs which hugged the pommel of her saddle, and was glad that Quick could not read her heart.

"I sha'n't be brother Dick, to-morrow, Quick; I shall be myself. Not Nance of Belton any more."

Quick did not know what to say, for the pathos of it touched his honest heart. He was glad enough to see the lights of the cottage wherein his old mother awaited him, and a good hot supper steamed on the hob, and gentle hands and gentle words ministered to the little fugitive. Nance slept in the clean white bed as a child come home again; and when at dawn she set out to ride into the town of Kettering, it was with a new shame of her dress and a determination to change it that very hour if opportunity befell.

"My habit is in the pack, Quick. Once by Kettering, none will bear news of me to Belton. We should go alone upon the road, for who will be abroad at daybreak? You are sure that we shall meet none, Quick?"

"Ay, mistress, I be sure enough. And if we do meet 'em, what then? Can't a lady ride as she please? Don't you think nothing of it, miss, for if so be as passun's right, there 's many a one played at being brother Dick before you and me was born, and not so pretty at it as folks I could name. I know a house in Kettering where the lad may go in and his sister come out. We 'll reach it before the shutters are down, or this is n't Lawyer Rushton's little 'un that be carrying me."

He set a good pace with the words and they struck the high road to Kettering presently. Here they had ridden but a little way when they heard a horn winded, and one of "they new-fangled yellow boys" as Quick called the new mail coaches, came up the hill at a canter. To be sure, the driver stared to see a hand-

some lad with his knee about the pommel of a woman's saddle, but the three red-faced men upon the roof were all as sound asleep as mice in December — and, after all, it was but a vision of rubicund jowls and weather-proof hats and four stout horses that carried themselves bravely. Much less to Nance's liking was the sudden apparition of a white-haired old gentleman upon an ambling white horse, who appeared unexpectedly at the turn of the road, and no sooner saw the travellers than he claimed companionship of them and began to trot at Nance's side toward the town of Kettering.

"Early about, young sir," he said, in a kindly voice; "I trust the business that carries you is less urgent than my own, which kept me last night at Clipston at the bedside of a friend. Nevertheless, I would not complain. We see the sun at dawn too rarely — and surely it is God's good hour. Can anything surpass the sweetness of this air or the smiling face of this beautiful land of ours when the night is rolled away. Body and mind

benefit thereby. We are better men, sir, better men because we see the better things. If your way lie to Kettering, I will even ask your company, for what says Syrus — '*Comes jucundus in via pro vehiculo est.*' Let us translate freely, and say, 'Always take snuff with the fellow on the box seat.' Mine is the best Welsh, as a pinch of it, will tell you."

Now Nance wished this pleasant old gentleman, who talked so very affably, at the bottom of the deepest blue sea; but he was so plainly a person of quality, and his black clothes were so fine, and the diamonds in his ruffles so sparkling, and he had such a very grand air, that she did not know how she might avoid him; nor could she find any excuse for doing so. Moreover, his voice had a tender ring which won her sympathy; and her quick little head told that, since he had discovered her, she might as well ride into Kettering with him as any other. But his snuff she would not take, and she proffered her excuses very prettily.

"I thank you, sir, but I have not learned

the habit. When I come to your years of discretion you shall perchance make no such charge against me. As for going into Kettering with you, if it is nothing to you that I must ride my sister's horse that far, then I am your servant. But account me blameless if any laugh at us."

The benevolent old gentleman looked at his little companion very closely.

"The laughter of the vulgar is the scorn of the learned," he said wisely. "Your sister hunts from Kettering to-day, I venture, and you are abroad to take her a horse. A kindly task, young sir. That man who serves woman not because he hopes something of his sex, but at the plainer dictates of brotherly love, comes nearer to the truer charity than many that boast of good works. Let your sister's welfare be close to your heart. She, in turn, will thank God every day that her brother lives."

He snuffed sagely with the words and touched his horse gently with the cane he carried. Nance, in her turn, was silent now. How different would it have been,

she said, if she could have thanked God every day that her brother Richard lived. She was very lonely on that bright sunny morning, in spite of her new companion, and all the world before her seemed strangely empty. When next the benevolent old gentleman looked down at her, he saw tears in her eyes.

"My poor lad!" he exclaimed in a very gentle voice, "I fear you are ill; ride on bravely yet ten minutes, and we shall be at the inn of Kettering. Nay, out on me for a clumsy tongue that speaks a bitter memory. You have lost a brother, may be — or one dearer."

Nance did not know why it was that she must, despite her resolution, tell so much to this stranger upon the road; but all her heart spoke when she said:

"I have none dear to me; I am alone in the world."

It was a puzzling answer, and it puzzled the benevolent old gentleman very much. For quite a long time he looked at Nance and then at the sky above him, and then at the houses of Kettering which they

could now discern between the trees. Whatever his secret was, however, he kept it from his companions; nor did he utter a single word until they had entered the town and were at the doors of the great inn, which is famous throughout the county. There the old fellow dismounted from his horse very nimbly, and holding out both hands to Nance, he whispered something that brought all the blood to her cheeks and set her trembling for very shame.

"Little girl," he said, "come indoors and tell me your trouble."

She began to protest, but he silenced her with a courtly gesture.

"Nay, I am Lord Walsingham, and her ladyship is upstairs. Her heart is ever open to those in distress."

Nance, put to it now, obeyed him wonderingly. And going to the hostelry with him she found new friends in the very last place where it might have been supposed she would have looked for them.

Chapter XII

Some Months pass by, and our Old Friend, the Squire of Naseby, is heard of at the "Mitre" Inn

AT two o'clock, upon a dull day of October, exactly six months after Nance of Belton had left her home, there might have been observed in the precincts of the "Mitre" inn, which lies opposite to the church of St. Dunstan-in-the-West, as any townsman knows, the broad figures and the merry faces of two pedestrians who certainly were not citizens, and as certainly knew nothing of London's men and London's ways. To the ordinary passer-by, the red cheeks and the good stout cloth and the merry eye of these youths recalled no more than the pleasant

fields of Hampstead, or the flowers you might gather beyond the village of Charing; but we, who have followed this affair from the beginning, would have recognized them for our old friends Dicky Dallas, the parson's son, and Bobby Bellars of Barton, lost in the clamour and the noise of that busy thoroughfare, and mighty glad to find the quiet of the inn-yard and the odd civility of the "boots" who there enlightened them.

"No charge, gentlemen, at least none you don't make yourself. The Squire of Naseby's upstairs, true enough, and there you'll find him if you do but step up. A wonder, gentlemen, upon my life and honour, for what has he done this very day but kick his dancing master down the gallery, and only saved from breaking his neck by that same heap of dung. Your servant, sirs. Hi, Joe, my cockalorum! —two for the Squire of Naseby and quick about it."

Dicky Dallas and Bobby Bellars took heart of the news.

"It's Jack, right enough."

"I 'll wager him for the jig against all London."

"But he would n't take the learning civilly."

"He 's all for quality now, I hear. Silk vests, and pinches his toes in the tight-fitting shoe."

"I would n't be his dancing master, Dicky, I vow. To be kicked downstairs — 't is just like Jack."

"Oh, but he 's in love, Bobby! Where 's Dame Patience when Eros calls a coach. We 'll catch him at his toilet, and have the laugh of him — hush, softly!"

The person addressed by the "boots" as "Joe, my cockalorum!" had conducted them by this time to a room upon the second floor, where, bursting in suddenly, they found the Squire of Naseby sitting before a brisk fire, and holding a genteel book in his hand. Very different was he in manner and dress from that Jack Danvers who had quitted their good county not a month ago. A fine coat of black satin wrinkled upon his ample shoulders; his vest was all of gold em-

broidery and silver thread; he wore dainty shoes and costly silk stockings. They would never have known him had they passed him by in the street; but here in his own room, why, the very house echoed his whoop as he sprang up to greet them.

"Dicky, by all the varmints! Ecod, and Bobby too! Ay, but my heart goes out to ye, lads! Hi, you, waiter, a bottle of the 'stingo, and glasses, man! Would you have my friends grow faint? But we'll make a night of it, boys, a night of it."

Dick Dallas affected some hesitation.

"We interrupt you at your studies, Jack."

"My studies — hark to him! Jack Danvers come to the books! Why, lads, 't is all about the Valley of Ignorance and such like places. Lord forgive me, if I 've not a free house there, ay, and a garden too, which all the doctors in London may rake if they please. We 'll put him in the fire, poor Noll Goldsmith, for they do tell me he was a kindly gentleman with a warm heart for every one. Your health, lads! Lord, but I'm precious glad to see ye!"

They drained a bumper apiece and drew up to the cosy fire.

Bobby Bellars was the first to speak.

"We hear you're all for quality now, Jack — and the newest fashion. 'T is quite the thing, they tell me, to kick the dancing master downstairs when his step does n't suit. I am glad you do the old county its justice. You've a splendid foot for the mode, lad, if I am not misinformed."

Jack flushed like a girl.

"Have nothing to do with them, Bobby. On my life, there are enough rogues in this London city to send a regiment to the Americas. I 'm so larded, feathered, laced, powdered, and put about, that, confound me, if I know which is plain Master Jack and which is Danvers, Esquire. Faith now, remembering what sent me here, would ye have me cut it for a country lout that gapes when he should sigh, and sighs when he should tune for a round-about? Ecod, said I, if it's to be the mode, I 'll have the best that a good man can owe for — and, plague 'em! the best they

have n't sent me, but a lisping rogue that came here on his toes and would teach me the minuetto and the fandango and all the rest of it, like a dancing bear, to the tune of Ariadne. 'Sir,' says he, 'your leg, I see, is better shaped to the back of a horse than to the graceful deportment of the arietta or the saraband, but that we shall mend on compulsion, and I will even ask you to strike an attitude, as I shall dictate. Death and destruction!' says he, 'you have a foot that is altogether remarkable, but we shall know him better by and by.' 'Ay, that you will,' says I. and with that, lads, I kicked him down the gallery, and kicked him up again for a mealy-mouth, go-on-your-toes that did n't know a gentleman when he saw one. Ay, but I 'll have no more of him, nor of his like. Out on your quality, say I, which bends a man's nose to his breeches, and makes him prance on his toes when God has given him an honest foot. If 't were not for little Nance, I 'd be on the box of the mail to-morrow, Dicky, and no bones about it. I 've had enough of

London town to last me a lifetime and my son's after."

"Ay, when you 've got a son, Jack. 'T will be twelve good months yet, and every one to be counted. You must go at the canter, lad, or Joey Chetwynd will show you the way over. They tell me that Nance came to London from Ware yesterday — then, what has she been doing all these days?"

"Who told you that, Dick?"

Dick's eyes twinkled.

"One that knows, Jack; one that knows her well."

Jack shook his head.

"Lawyer Rushton, for a guinea. He tells me that Belton is quite made over to the new man, and little Nance forgotten in the house. Surely, lads, it 's a sad story altogether. I 'd give half the fortune left to me this day to make it a brighter one. Look now, there 's three months to the New Year and what then — Nance living among strangers and this coxcomb strutting it in her father's house. Ay, it makes my heart bleed."

"You 'll marry her before Christmas, Jack, and have done with it."

Jack went on, as though thinking of something else.

"I was up at Lord Walsingham's great house, it lies by the park of St. James's, not a week ago. The letter that I left for her wants an answer yet, and that puzzles me mightily. They say that she 's become the daughter of the house, and the old man head over ears in love with her."

"As he 's been head over ears with a dozen more in as many months. A smooth-tongued old varmint, that plays the Corydon in the *rôle* of *pater benevolens*. Egad, he asks a blessing with his eyes, they tell me, and squeezes their hands under the table that his wife sha'n't see. A double-faced old fox, that will keep Nance in the bosom of his family while he 's a tongue to prate paternally. I like him not, Jack; I like him not."

Jack shook his head.

"You were always a pessimy, Bobby, and at your wise saws. But I 'll forgive him if he touches fingers with Nance and does

not get his ears boxed. She's no girl for their flummery and foolery; but just the prettiest lass in Northamptonshire, that I'd pay twenty guineas to see this day."

Dick Dallas's eyes twinkled again.

"Pay over thy money, Jack — shalt see her this very night."

"Ecod, Dicky, if you were not at your games."

"But I'm not, lad; I'm not. And so I'll out with it. 'T is Nance herself who asks you — "

Jack sprang to his feet.

"Ye've seen her, Dicky — nay, ye'll not plague me!"

"As true as a good horse, I saw her this very morning in the park of St. James's. She'll be with the old Earl at the ridotto to-night. Call a coach, man; call a coach! 'T is hey, for Ranelagh and the light fantastic toe."

They say that Jack Danvers broke the bell-rope when he summoned "Joe, my cockalorum!" to the room.

"Another bottle, lad; another bottle of your best!"

Chapter XIII

Which shows that a mask is often seen through

THE advertisements announced that there would be, for the last time of the season, a Ridotto, or Bal Paré, at Ranelagh House that night, when it would be left to the nobility and gentry to come in fancy dresses without masks, or dressed as at the Ridottos. There was, further, a promise of a serenato to the music which Mr. Handel made for the Firework as long ago as the year 1748; together with a great display of half-pound sky-rockets and pieces of three mutations and Roman candles and Chinese fire and other wonders, at which the crowd might gape as it took its brandy and water and promenaded in the great rotunda. Illuminations of the

canal, the temple, and various parts of the gardens would complete, so said the announcement, a very pretty masquerade; to which the nobility and gentry aforesaid were invited to come early, the doors being opened at six o'clock and the burletta to begin at seven; while security was promised by many horse-patrols upon the new road from Buckingham Gate, and by links, which the proprietor declared would attend the ladies' chairs. It would be no matter for surprise that such generous intentions drew a fashionable throng to Chelsea on the occasion when we must follow Jack Danvers and his friends to the heart of the gardens there, or stand with him as he stares up at the "finely gilt, painted, and illuminated" amphitheatre wherein, as Horace Walpole told us, all the city might eat, drink, stare, or crowd for twelvepence upon a common occasion, or for one guinea when the finer novelty of the Bal Paré drew the fashionable westward to Ranelagh House. Jack had seen many things in his life (so he thought) — there was no better judge of

a horse or a bottle in all the shires — but this, he confessed, was something to make a man stare. As for Dicky Dallas, he had no eyes for gilt or tinsel, no ears, certainly, for the music which Mr. Handel made; the wenches, he said, had the liveliest wit man ever listened to; and as for their points, he admitted that you could not beat them from London to Edinboro' city. Well might a man carry himself bravely in that company, and often feel the squeeze of a dainty little shoulder against his own, or touch a pretty hand, or change glances with eyes so dark that you lost yourself in the black mischief of them. Bobby Bellars, in his turn, gave up his pet philosopher, and, being unable to stand upon the argument, he stood upon his toes instead and gaped at the strange finery, and followed with admiring eyes the knowing fellows who strutted it in silks and satins, and powder and lace, and diamonds that might have ransomed a king. The lasses, he would have told you, had feet so small that it was a wonder they found shoes to fit them.

Their frank desire to make his acquaintance touched his sentiment as generosity toward a stranger. When one of them drank a great deal of negus (at his expense) in one of the boxes, he was ready to declare Ranelagh the gayest place in the world, but dear withal, and better suited to a rich man than a poor squire, whose father had played the devil with his heritage. But Dicky, the simple lad, would have liked to believe they were all princesses, and that he was the Knight of the fables come to that place upon an heroic purpose. He would remember the gardens at Ranelagh to his dying day, he said.

A gay scene, none gayer in town as the fashion declared. You might see the first gentleman in Europe there that night, and wits galore, and great dames in the boxes behind their patches and their powder; such a rustling of silks and scraping of fiddlers, and brightness of lights and clack of tongues that a man might lose the sound of his own voice therein. To Jack Danvers it was as a scene from a fairy book; but it lacked a fairy, and for two

long hours his anxious eyes searched rotunda and promenade and garden path for the divinity who alone could help him to happiness. Where was Nance, he asked? She had promised Dicky to be at the serenato, but the fiddlers fiddled, and the fops drank, and the hussies ogled, and devil a sign of his heart's desire, or of those who had befriended her. None should take her place, he swore as much gallantly; and though a dainty little figure in one of the boxes looked down often at him, as he flattered himself, he made it plain that he wanted none of her company. And that was odd, for it was Nance herself who sat in the box, and my Lord Walsingham was with her, and his daughter Meg for propriety's sake. Later on, when the fiddlers rested and all the folk went out to see the lights upon the waters, Nance, wearing a splendid gown of blue satin, all puffed and spangled and decked out with costly lace, came down from the rotunda with my lord, and jostled elbows with Jack as he stood upon the brink of the canal.

At the first he did not know her, thinking it was the sly bit of goods he had seen in the gallery; but when she came closer still to him, and drew her mask aside, though it was but a hair's-breadth, he gave a view halloa, and held out both his hands to her.

"Nance of Belton, by all that's wonderful! And I passed you by for another. Lord, to think of that — for another!"

He shook her little hand as though he never would have done with it; but Nance, seeing the old earl had his eyes upon them, withdrew her arm sharply, and answered him with less warmth than he could have wished.

"My old friends in London are too few to permit me to pass them by even at Ranelagh, Master Danvers. Let me present you to Lord Walsingham, who has been very kind to me when I needed it."

Now, the old earl bowed to Jack, with great nicety and a very fine manner; but Jack, in his turn, looked the old earl up and down, and cast such an eye upon him as he would upon any new horse that a

stranger had brought to his stables. He was in no mood to be civil, for had not Nance called him Master Danvers, and was not that a title he had rarely heard from her lips before? In truth, he did not like my Lord Walsingham at all.

"There are many that would be kind to Nance of Belton if she had the mind to let them," he said, bluntly; "as one that was a child with her, I thank you for your friendship, my lord."

The old earl smiled affably.

"Nothing, nothing; name nothing," he said, with an airy gesture; "our house is honoured in its guest. And its doors, Master Danvers, are always open to any of Miss Dene's friends. She remains with us until her unhappy affairs are settled. I trust for our content that misfortune will walk with measured footsteps."

"Indeed, you begin to make me wish that too, Lord Walsingham," said Nance, "but none the less solicitous for the news of Belton. Tell me, Jack, does Mr. Rushton ride Mulberry still?"

Jack brightened at the question.

"There 's no other horse in the stable for him. The old nag's as fat as a pig, and as lazy. Your cousin has closed the new yard, and built what he calls a 'servatory, or something, where the old summer-house used to be. Things are wonderful changed there, Nance. They 've three new maids, and Loving the gardener is taken on by Parson Dallas."

"News of vast import," said the old earl, with little less than a sneer; "you are a very *Evening Chronicle*, Mister Danvers. Upon my word, this interesting talk might well keep Miss Dene from the firework. But they will not be kept, I 'll swear."

Meg, his daughter, a bouncing little girl who had eyes for all the men, was willing enough to go on.

"Let Mister Danvers tell us all his news to-morrow, Nance. I vow I should not sleep if we missed the firework, and there goes the rocket light."

A flame of fire shot into the air. The crowd said "Bravo," and began to push forward, carrying Nance and the old earl with it. She had just time to touch Jack's

hand, and to whisper, "Come soon," before she lost him in the press; for he lacked the courage to go on with her.

"And, as I'm a living man," he said to Dicky Dallas, later on, "she called me 'Mister Danvers.'"

Chapter XIV

Wherein we are all very much surprised; but not so much as the Hero of our Story

DICKY DALLAS and Bobby Bellars were wonderfully busy in London city during the week that followed upon their visit to Ranelagh House; and they discovered, as many a one had discovered before their day, that it is money which makes the wheels go round; and that, without money, the very best gentleman that ever put on the very best boot is thought no more of than the ostler who runs out to him in the inn-yard, if, indeed, he is rated as high as that popular serving man. So quickly, in truth, did the two young men disburse the contents of the sober purses they had carried from Northamptonshire, that the fourteenth day found

them at their reckonings, and the fifteenth in so gloomy a mood that even the life and the bustle of the old "White Horse Cellar" in Piccadilly could not draw a civil word from them. All of which proved, as Master Bob the philosopher set forth, that money is a curse to him that has it, and to him that has it not; but, said he, if he were pressed to make a choice, he would sooner be confounded in the first category than the second; in which wise reflection Dicky Dallas entirely agreed with him.

"Better to go home with a guinea and a shirt than a shirt without the guinea, Bobby; there's a stage to Northampton to-morrow morning, and we'll borrow horses there. Egad, my old father will be surprised. He gave me two months to have a squint at the world and make the guineas ring; but fourteen days, Bobby — fourteen days — "

"The fifteenth, Dicky — ay, put the best horse to the door. 'T is sixteen days to-morrow since I left Barton with seventy-five golden guineas in my pockets, and devil of a one this hour, upon my honour!

Lord, they went like water down a river, and nothing for it — not a cursed trinket to carry to my sister."

"Ay, we 'll come to the gentlemen of the road, after all, Bobby. A fine tale for my old father — three rogues upon Bushey Common and a pistol at my head. They stole the gold watch you carried to your sister. Mischief on me, that I wrote a letter to Belton to speak of our safe arrival!"

"But you did write, Dicky, and that 's the end of it. We 'll just come in with our tails between our legs, and say no more about it. Nay, confound me! a tail is just as well between the legs as in any other place. And not so likely to be hurt as stuck out behind."

They were in the coffee-room of the "White Horse Cellar," that famous hostelry of Arlington-street, in Piccadilly, when these gloomy forebodings were indulged in; and Bobby Bellars, sighing again for the loss of his guineas, went and stood at the window to see the coaches passing in the gloom of that November day,

and to console himself in the near presence of ostlers, grooms, and horseflesh of quite uncommon value. The stage coach was then newly come to great prosperity through all the kingdom, and nowhere in the city could you see such "cattle," such men, or such a splendour of caparison, as at the "White Horse Cellar" in Piccadilly. The Squire of Barton admitted that it was hard to leave all that, fifteen days after he had set out to see the world. Those cursed guineas; they melted in London town as snow in April!

They say that our misfortunes never touch so low an ebb but that the misfortunes of another find a lower; and sorrowful as these youths were upon that November day, they granted you later on, when Jack Danvers came blundering into the room, that he had a more grievous tale to tell. For Jack was decked out as a gallant for a rendezvous, in coat of satin and satin breeches and powdered hair, and all the glory of lace and diamonds and splendid cane. But the look upon his face was that of a man at the extremity of woe, and

he fell rather than sat in the little box whither his friends conducted him.

"How, Jack, already!"

"Ay, Dicky, already. Get me some brandy, lad."

"A bucketful, confound me, now."

"She called him 'Mister Danvers,'" suggested Bobby Bellars.

"But women are quick at the forgetting."

"Come, out with it, Jack. We die of impatience."

Jack set his hat upon the table, and wiped his forehead with a silken handkerchief. Then he began his confession:

"I went to the house, Dicky — fifty paces from here by the waters of the park. Lord, I never thought there were so many coaches. There was a fellow in red breeches opened the door to me, and a dozen more in the hall behind him. 'Jack Danvers,' says I to myself, 'be on your quality manners to-day, and try to rap out a word of the French that Parson Dallas taught you.' 'T was easy said, but not so soon done, lads. No sooner was I inside that fine house than, what with the she-devils in

paint and patches on the stairs, and the lacqueys standing there for all the world like soldiers in a row, not a word came to my lips, and I was mum as a jug. Lord, the sweat ran down my face, I 'll swear, and there was Red-breeches looking at me, and me looking at Red-breeches like two cocks in a run. 'Zounds, man,' says I at last; 'will ye know me again?' and, says he, 'Ay, among a hundred.' 'Then let 's see you put your best leg forward, and say I 'm here.' 'Your name, my lord,' cries he, 'your name, if you please;' and I could see the other red legs clap their hands to their mouths like boys at a class when the master slips. 'No lord at all,' says I, 'but plain Jack Danvers, of Belton, to see Miss Nancy Dene.' 'Unlucky, I swear,' says he, 'for my young mistress is gone but an hour to take the waters at Hampstead; but her ladyship receives,' says he. 'Oh, her ladyship be d—d,' says I, not thinking at all about it until the powders and patches on the stairs went off like the firework at Ranelagh. Ay, I fairly bolted then, and never stopped until I saw the

'Cellar.' God save me from the like of it, for I would n't go back to Red-breeches for a hundred on the table."

Now, despite their own troubles, Dicky Dallas and Bobby Bellars laughed very loudly at Jack's discomfiture, and it was not until he feared his friend's anger that Bobby managed to ask a question.

"But ye'll never leave Nance, Jack; ye'll never leave her like that!"

Jack finished his brandy and water at a gulp, and went on with it. "You've the laugh of me, boys, true enough," said he ruefully; "but what's done can't be undone, and if her ladyship is hurt by any word of mine, some other must speak her salvation. See here, now, this bit of a letter I've written."

"What, Jack, you wrote it yourself?"

"Ay, from 'The Mitre Inn.'"

"M—i—mi—t—e—r—ter—Miter," said Dicky, playfully spelling it; but Jack pounced on him.

"How would you begin if 't were yourself that did it, Dicky?" he asked.

"I — oh, I should say, 'Adorable mistress of a thousand charms — '"

"Or a thousand and one, like the tales from Araby," chimed in Bobby Bellars.

"Name yourself a daisy root that she must tread on —"

"Call all the gods to witness your despair. Her eyes are like the blue, blue sea; her breath is like the rose — the red, red rose. Make your couch on her youthful cheek as the Sophocles of old time. Hint that you rave and faint and die for her, having read Mister Addison, who lies on the study table in my father's house. Nay, Jack, come it in all the words you can spell, lad, and no hurt shall be done."

Jack shook his head.

"I mislike your poetry, Dick, and Mr. Addison must bide where you left him for all the help he 'll give me. An honest letter, and no more, I 've written, that she shall answer a plain yea or nay to."

"Read it to us — read it, Jack!"

"No, lads, but ye shall read it first, and if she finds it in her heart to think of a man who has loved her from her childhood, she shall save Belton yet."

"And otherwise 't is for you to glean

the Naseby estate. There 'll be horses the fewer in your stable, Jack, and wagers kept for holidays —"

"And all the officers put to shame because their man has turned a leaf —"

"Lawyer Rushton says you might be well-to-do even yet, Jack."

"I 'll try, lad, for little Nance's sake. She 's to answer that 'ay or nay' by Saturday, and if it 's what I wish, there 'll be the happiest man on the stage-coach, come Monday morning, that the three kingdoms can show you."

"We 'll meet you at the Cross, Tuesday, and ride in with you. And hey for the cubs on Wednesday!"

Jack's eyes lit up as with a memory.

"Ay, give me a good horse and a good lass, and I 'll not barter my life for the Chancellor's sack."

"Done, Jack; to a horse and a lass! I drink that."

So a bottle was called for, and glasses were set, and there was talk of all these three loved best, of rattling gallops and game foxes and horses they had known.

Reconciled now to leave the glamour and the glitter of the great city behind them, and to go again where a man might breathe God's fresh air, they pledged their home in a hearty bumper, and brought ostlers to their door to hear the old stave:

"Fox in the fallow
Passun in the plough,
And we 'll all go a-hunting in the morning."

It was late that night when they separated, the two waiting the stage which would carry them to Northampton; but Jack Danvers, excited as he had never been in all his life, when he told himself that to-morrow Nance would read his letter, and to-morrow, perchance, would answer it. But his excitement was readily forgotten next morning when a shabby fellow came into his bedroom at "The Mitre" inn, and having shut the door very carefully, proceeded to demand the unheard-of sum of one hundred pounds three shillings and sixpence.

"Now, no nonsense, Master Danvers," said this very unpleasant personage; "I 'm

"A shabby fellow came into his bedroom"

a Sheriff's officer, Nathaniel Figg by name, and if you can't pay the money, I've a hackney at the door for you."

Poor Jack stared at him as at one in a dream.

"Sheriff's officer — one hundred pounds three shillings and sixpence! Ecod, man, I don't owe a crown in the city."

"At the suit of Sir Joseph Chetwynd, of Belton," said the officer. "Is it clear to you now?"

Jack shook his head. He had never been further from understanding anything in his life. And he understood it less when he found himself next day in the Fleet Prison, and remembered that he had not one friend in London to whom he might address himself for counsel or for charity.

Chapter XV

Samuel Wiggett, the Lawyer, proves to be an Orphan and my Lord goes shopping

THE eve of the Christmas feast found Nance of Belton in London still; for her ladyship was too ill to bear the fatigue of a journey to her country house at Ware, and my Lord of Walsingham had a good heart for the gaieties of the town, where he could match his incontinence by an affectation of fatherly goodness and a Christian charity toward all offenders, more especially when they were of the female sex. Nance found him ever a very tender counsellor; but her quick wit soon measured the motive of his benevolence, and she knew that Walsingham House was open to her rather as the theatre of my lord's opportunities than as any home where

she might bide in true content. Outwardly solicitous for her well-being, consulting the great lawyer, Mr. Samuel Wiggett, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, very frequently on her behalf, the earl, nevertheless, could play the amorous part when occasion served — though, to give him his due, he played it with much circumspection, and never so boldly that she had any fear of him or of her virtue. Indeed, his capers amused her mightily; and but for the shadow of her misfortune, which loomed more threateningly every day, she might well have accounted them as the price of his hospitality, and in that mood have condoned an old man's humour. But the shadow forbade — and the shadow she must see even when the Christmas feast was kept in London town, and all the world spoke of good will toward men.

My lord, we say, was solicitous for her welfare, and mightily anxious to save her, if she could be saved, from the misfortune her father had unwittingly put upon her. Very frequently she went with him to Mr. Wiggett's house by Lincoln's Inn, and

there again heard the plain truth of the will which the late Robert Dene, in a moment of his anger, had made to her cost. One such visit was paid upon the very eve of Christmas, when the snow lay thick upon all the gables, and from Paul's to the Cross at Charing you might see nothing but a whitened city, and coaches rolling over the frozen ground, and men crying the greetings to one another, and all the apprentices shouting together for joy of the morrow. The great Mr. Wiggett, himself, a man of prodigious stature and immense breadth, received Nance and my lord very affably in his private office; but could tell them no more than he had told them, ay, a dozen times already.

"You might try a caveat, Lord Walsingham, but I have doubt of its virtues. The will is rightly made, and its intention is upon the face of it. A man is to be found for the management of the estate, if our young friend has no mind to take one. Let her be of another mind to-morrow, and all will be well. The codicil, which annuls the whole, goes by default, since the son,

Richard Dene, died at Tangore. Is not that so, Miss Dene? Your brother died at Tangore — "

Nance's eyes filled with tears.

"Brother Richard died of his wounds in Madras," she said.

"And you were left an orphan. Ah, you win my pity — I am an orphan myself!"

He tapped his burly chest so dolefully that my lord burst out laughing there and then.

"Hark to him," he said; "an orphan that weighs twenty stone! Do you not weigh twenty stone, brother Wiggett?"

"To a pound, my lord, to a pound."

"Egad, you 'd eat out an almshouse in a week, brother Wiggett. Let 's have done with him. Miss Dene has no fancy to take the one course that can save her lands. I go with her in the choice. One house in London is always open to her, and another at Ware. She has, moreover, three hundred pounds a year of her fortune still. We shall make her happy, brother Wiggett, in the true Christian spirit."

Brother Wiggett, knowing my lord well, did not doubt that he would try; and Nance said that her happiness would mean a squeeze of the hand when she sat at table with the earl, and, it might be, a kiss upon the stairs, in the true Christian spirit, when her ladyship's back chanced to be turned. All that was in her heart she dared not tell them. Bravely she wrestled with the tears that love for Belton might have cost her.

"I accept my defeat, Mr. Wiggett," she said frankly; "but it is hard to lose the home you have loved. At least, I may claim my own things; they will not take those from me. There is not a dog at Belton that knows another voice."

"We 'll build a kennel for them as big as the Round Tower," cries the earl gallantly; "you shall have your own, Nance, though a regiment says no. Leave it to lawyer Wiggett. He 'll outrascal them, I 'll warrant."

Samuel Wiggett's chest swelled at the compliment. He took snuff and an oath

to recover, that very week, all that Nance should schedule for her own at Belton.

"Yet not to-morrow," said he; "for to-morrow is Christmas Day, which even a lawyer may not forget. I give you joy of the season, my lord, to you and your house.

"Thank ye, Wiggett, thank ye," said my lord merrily; "I 've joy enough for an old man who loves to see the children laugh. We 'll leave you to your prayers, sir, and on with it. What saith the Scriptures? — 'Do unto the other as ye would that he should do unto you.' That 's no text for a lawyer, eh, Wiggett; no text at all? Peace to men of good will and on verdicts for the Chancery Bar. 'Pon my life, what a thing that would be!"

Samuel Wiggett admitted that it would be a very poor thing indeed; and when my lord had twitted him again and whispered a knowing word in his ear, and they had laughed together, and left little Nance to conjure up, while she waited, a vision of Belton and of the woods and thickets there, made all glorious by the witchery of

frost and snow, the old yellow coach rumbled on once more; for, as my lord reminded her, they must not go home without the geegaws for Susan, Countess of Walsingham, nor for Meg, her daughter, and Cheapside would be exceeding busy that night. Down Fleet-street they went, and across the Fleet Bridge, and so close to that fœtid prison where the debtors lay, that if Jack Danvers had but raised his voice, the half of a miracle would have permitted Nance to hear him. Ironic was the destiny which sent the mistress all unheeding by the gate which shut her lover from the world. Nance knew nothing of the reasons which denied to her the fruits of her answer to Jack's honest letter. She had written from her heart the simple message: "Take me to Belton" — and remained forsaken. Whether Jack were alive or dead she did not know. The inquiries which the faithful Quick enabled her to set afoot were profitless and unrewarded. At Naseby nothing was sure but the fact that the Squire lingered still in London town. The folk at "The Mitre"

inn spoke harshly of bills unpaid and of a sudden flight from that hostelry. The old earl shook his head and said it was no mystery. Many a man had reasons for avoiding his friends in that great city. The Squire was young, and it was human nature after all.

"The lad was playing with you, my dear; think no more of him. We shall find you a better lover and make no haste about it. To me you will always be my little Nance. My house is your house, for I knew your father, and esteemed him. An honest man gives thanks that a kindness may be charged at his door — but a good girl who brings laughter and youth as her dowry is sent to an old man's house by God alone. I am a grateful old man, my dear — a grateful old man!"

To give him his due, he did not hesitate to prove his gratitude by many a fatherly touch upon her hand, and many an amorous sigh as of one wounded pleasantly to the heart's core. That journey in the old yellow coach was such an opportunity as he rarely enjoyed. He would make the

most of it, for to-morrow her ladyship might be about again.

"Lean a little to my side the coach, Nance, and I'll warrant you'll see the shops finely. Upon my life, who would think there were so many men and women in the world! And such finery! Nay, you shall name a gift and the men will bring it this instant. I'll not have Christmas pass and no token of my love to you."

Nance looked at him archly.

"You mean it, my lord?"

"Ay, if I mean it! Put me to the proof now."

"I will this instant. You shall buy me a silver watch and a copper chain for Quick, my groom."

"The devil! I'd rather a gold chain for your pretty neck, my dear, though, on my honour, it needs no ornament."

"All the more reason to obey me. But I shall have my copper chain for Quick. I am set upon it, my lord—"

"Then wilt give me thanks?"

"Could I be more grateful?"

"I lack a token, my dear, a little token."

"There is my hand upon the bargain."

"Nay, if it were thy lips now — "

"Oh, Lord Walsingham ! "

"Come, the half of one for the goodwill, and the chain is yours."

She feigned great reluctance, but by and by kissed him very prettily.

"Dear father," she said; but that was not so pleasant to his ears.

"Ods cruelty, and her ladyship snug in bed. Egad, if I forget her geegaws, God help me, Nance! You must accompany me to the shop, little witch, or I 'll die of the apprentices' tongues. Lean upon my arm — come, but a suspicion."

His footman, who was in the dickey of the coach, forced a way for him through the press about the goldsmith's shop by St. Paul's Church ; and for an hour he went with a child's wonder through the gay streets, even down Cheapside to the Mansion House, and thence by way of the river to his home again. It was late already when they returned ; nevertheless,

Nance found opportunity to run to the stables with her present, and to put it into the old groom's hand, as he wished her a blessing for Christmas-time.

"Ay, miss, that ye should have thought of it," he cried, and there was that in his throat he would have denied with anger. "My heart is full, God knows, this very day, mistress!"

"And my heart is at Belton, Quick," she said; "it will never be elsewhere. They have taken my home from me, but one friend is left. Oh, I cannot think of it — I am a stranger in the world, and none cares!"

"There 's one that cares, and, dang 'un, nothing shall change him, mistress! Nay, think not so blackly, for the sun may shine on you and me, Miss Nance, even yet."

We close our chapter with the prayer: May the sun shine even yet on little Nance of Belton!

Chapter XVI

Belton Abbey passes to Another; and Nance dreams of a door that is shut

THE week passed all swiftly — so swiftly that, to Nance, it was but a dream of the days. While she knew that the first day of the year would take Belton from her for ever, she was, nevertheless, unable to confront that great truth, or to comprehend it rightly. The mystery of her fate remained a mystery still. Again and again, in her desponding moments, she would go back to the old arguments, asking herself if she had done well to leave her home, or pondering once more upon Jack's strange silence. Why, indeed, had he — above all others — forsaken her in this evil hour? My Lord hinted that some shameful reason kept him from Lon-

don; but that she would not believe; nor was her faith the less because of his defaulting. Jack had met with some great misfortune, she thought; pity for him prevailed even above her necessity. Day and night found her seeking, in her imagination, some just pretext for his conduct. Even my Lord's daughter, Meg, whose chubby round face and great promise of embarrassing maturity did not forbid a relish for languishing romance, was listened to in her odd *rôle* of comforter.

"He's at the jest of it, Nance," said Meg, on the morning of that New Year's Eve; "the pleasure is the better pleasure still when it surprises us. Who can say, he may come this very hour! He will have a coach and four horses at the door. Lud! how I should be shamed if a man came to take me away in a coach and four horses. I should dissolve, my dear, I'll vow I should."

Meg was such a fat little thing, and so ready with her eyes for any man that chanced to exchange a word with her, that Nance thought this threatened fate of dis-

solution by no means to be apprehended as an immediate danger. But she would not believe in her friend's foolish fancies, nor be deluded by them.

"When Jack brings a coach and four to Walsingham House the horses will have wings, Meg," she said, with a brave attempt to turn it. "I will believe you when I see them. If there be any jest in love, it is not that which breaks a woman's heart with waiting. Say that Jack repented of his letter, and I will listen. He must have done, or how should he leave me so cruelly when I answered him as he wished?"

Meg tossed her head.

"Men love perversity. Do what they will, and they will it not. Had you said, 'I will not save Belton because you ask me,' he would have been here every day. But he will come, Nance — they love to vex us, dear; to see us pining for their consolations. He will come to-day, and look surprise in the eyes as though it were a natural thing for him to come. Nay, he should not vex me, I vow, for I would

box his ears, and be vexed to see him at my feet afterwards. They love the rod, and are never so well pleased as when we hold it. But she who spares them is their sport."

Nance would have none of it.

"A woman does not play with her affections as a creature at a play-house, Meg. I have been 'Nance' to him since my childhood, and he was always 'brother Jack' to me. I will not hold a rod for him nor ask for aught but an honest man's love. Your coach and four may pass in one of Mr. Richardson's books, but it will never come to Walsingham House for me, my dear — never, never!"

She turned away, fearing to tell the story of her hopes and dreams. There remained but fifteen hours, and Belton would be another's.

Nothing but a miracle, she said, could save that home for her, and miracles were of other times, as she had read in Mr. Hume's reasonings. If, in one hour, she was tempted to lend a willing ear to Meg's romantic whisperings, the next found her

sure in her purpose of resignation to her fate, and of submission to the destiny she might not pass by. God had willed her unhappiness, she thought; but she could lay to her charge no other crime than that of her waywardness and of the imprudence which were the firstfruits of her girlhood. She had been unable to bear the burdens which Belton had put upon her shoulders; but Belton was the better for her weakness and the love which her weakness gave to it.

It was New Year's Eve, and when the sun had set and all the lamps were twinkling in London town, the bells of the city rang out a merry stave, to herald the new year and to speed the old. Bouncing Meg's hope of a surprise was no more to be thought of then; there was no coach and four to bring Jack Danvers to Walsingham House; and as my lord said at the dinner table that day, the carriage which would do that had yet to leave the wheelwright's shop.

"Nay, Nance, my dear, you shall find many a man in London that will build

a new Belton for you, and glad when you 'll let him. I 'll wager you 'll have forgotten the very name of it this day next year. What, fret for bricks and mortar that were never so cheap, when there 's a house at Ware which needs a little girl's pretty face! Out on it, but I 'll promise you that we sha'n't part with you yet awhile. We know where the riches lie, little one. We know when God is good to us."

This he said when her ladyship was in another room; but Nance knew that she would never forget Belton; and when she went to bed that night to hear the sweet bells ringing, and to look out upon the moonlit park and all the glory of the winter scene, she said that her heart was broken, and that she had become an outcast in the world.

This house which sheltered her, how long might she find a haven behind its strange doors? These people who befriended her from such different motives, when would their motives cease to guide them? She had three hundred pounds a

year of fortune, it is true, and a kinswoman in London when she should care to seek her out, but the old home life was for ever done with; the old faces, the old friends, the old and well-beloved paths she had trodden in her childhood were of the past irrevocable. Never in all the world was there such a wild turn of fortune as that which had befallen her. Her father was distracted, she said, when he willed Belton to her cousin. Brother Richard's death had unmanned him, he mourned for his only son to his life's end, and found no more the sunshine of the other years. Had he lived, a day would have come when the will had been blotted out as men erase a record of their follies. But death spake suddenly, and the deed of temper stood.

The sweet bells could conjure up for Nance that night a dream of Belton and of the old life which might never be forgotten. She beheld her home in the spring-time of the year when the daffydowndillies raised golden heads and the scent of the lilac perfumed the gardens, and men went to and fro gladly because of the naissant day and

the joy of nature's labour. Or the scene would change, and the hush of the summer sleep call her to the placid lakes and the lazy river and all the golden harvest of the sun. Again a little while and she would hear the ringing notes of the horn, and the hounds' new tongue; and old Slim, her chestnut, would come whinnying to her hand, and she would join the happy company that hurried on to Tilton Wood or Cottesbrook. Then the year lay dying, and the leaves were its gravestones, and in the darkness the lights of Belton stood out as a beacon that would draw the poor and the needy and the sorrowful to its ever-open door. In her sleep she saw the lights again for a little while, and dreamed that she, too, was weary at heart and a wanderer, and that Belton called her homeward as often it had called the children of misfortune. Thither she hurried in her dream, and went with glad steps; but when she drew near the house, the light that she had seen shone out no more, and all the Abbey was in darkness. And Nance knew that even for her the door was shut, and never

again would open to her knock; and so she awoke with hot tears upon her cheek. She had slept heavily, and it was already late upon New Year's Day. Bouncing Meg came to her room with a good message from my lord, who thought to cheer her, for they knew that it was a fateful day, and did not wish her to remember it. Nance, herself, was astonished at her own courage now that the worst had befallen. Already she took the resolve that none should read her heart or be the witness of her sorrow. For her own part, she would not as much as have named Belton now; but scarcely was Meg, my lord's daughter, in the room than she rattled out a pleasant tale and set Nance's heart beating as it had not beat for many a year.

"We go to Ware to-day, Nance, and the coach is ordered for twelve o'clock. There will be the servants' dinner and dancing afterwards, and all the county comes to our hunt ball next Monday. My father says you are to go down at once and hear the news he keeps for you. And, oh!—I forgot—an attorney, one that says he knows

you, waits in the library and would speak with you. His name is Rushton — "

"Rushton, Mr. Rushton of Naseby — why, he is one of my true friends! I go down this instant, Meg. Nay, you shall help me to dress, for I vow that my hands tremble."

It was Lawyer Rushton, in truth, and Nance found him by the great fire of logs in the library, holding, as ever, the benevolent head of George the King in his hand, and snuffing with much deliberation as one who would combat perplexity. She observed that his usually pallid face was whiter than she had seen it, while his searching black eyes were restless and betrayed some agitation. When she came in to him, he held her hand in his own for a little while, and seemed unable to find a word for her.

"Mr. Rushton," she cried warmly, "there is no other name I could have heard with such pleasure."

"Nay," he said, his tongue released suddenly; "that is false witness, young lady, and I 'll not permit it. I know one name

— which had your servant cried — but of that presently, for he who goes too fast to the dinner is like to wait for the cooks. I bring you news of Belton — you'll ask me nothing more."

He drew a chair to the fire for her, and glanced a moment at the head of George the King. She, on her part, touched at the memory, did not know how to make a beginning of it.

"What is Belton to me that I should seek news of it now, Mr. Rushton?" she asked bitterly. "I remember the day when you promised me help and counsel for the asking; but the need has gone by. They were better given to my cousin."

Lawyer Rushton took snuff very methodically.

"Ay," he said, "the adage speaks of the dead past — yet when was the past ever dead, Miss Nance? Your cousin rules at Belton to-day. It had been different if the past had willed it so. I make no complaint, for if my life has taught me anything, it is to accept the judgment that is written. Let me quarrel with the ver-

dict of twelve honest men and true; but the word of a good woman I'll never dispute. Yet it is hard, my child — harder than one at your age may deem it."

He looked straight into the fire as he spoke, and Nance knew that he thought upon his love for her. A generous impulse of her friendship could reproach her illogically. Hard, indeed, that so many of those who loved her truly must win but bitterness of their fidelity. Such a price she paid for their affection.

"My age, at least, shall give me honour and gratitude for my friends, and lasting remembrance of them," she exclaimed warmly. "I shall never forget those that would have saved Belton for me — "

"And will save it now!" cried Lawyer Rushton, turning quickly.

Nance did not take his meaning — scarce heard him, indeed — and so went on to speak her own thoughts.

"You bring me news from home, Mr. Rushton. Pity my impatience, and forgive my importunity."

He smiled in his turn, for she had just

said that she wished no news from the Abbey.

"What news can I give you that Mr. Danvers has not already spoken?"

"Mr. Danvers! You jest with me. I have not seen him these two months."

"A true heart, my child, that would not come to others in his adversity."

She stood up with white face and beating heart. As in a flash, she knew why Jack had been silent.

"Mr. Danvers is ill, hurt — he is in trouble?" she cried.

Lawyer Rushton closed his snuff-box with a snap.

"Nay, he is in prison, young lady, and that's the end on it. Come, tears will not help him, where honest friendship may. Let me seek a remembrance. There were two bailiffs went a-hunting to Winton Coppice in the January of the year. The debt they claimed was one hundred pounds odd, at the suit of Hoggart, the horse dealer in Harborough. You put them on the road — a rough road, Miss Nance. And Hoggart, an honest fellow, laughed right heartily at

the jest. 'For her sake, I'll write a quittance,' said he, and that he would have done but for another, who heard talk of the matter, and went to him with a hundred golden guineas in his pocket to buy the debt. Certes! your cousin is a clever rogue. He bought Hoggart's claim, and pressed it against the Squire when Master Danvers most had need of his liberty. Ergo, the Fleet Prison and silence, and much suffering and shame, be assured. More than that, my child, your cousin's victory and temporary possession of your father's estate."

Nance had turned away, that he might not see her face while he told the story of Jack's trouble; but now she looked up through her tears:

"Temporary possession, Mr. Rushton?"

Mr. Rushton cracked his fingers.

"What saith the Scriptures? Man brought nothing into the world, and certainly shall carry nothing out. We will see what Sir Joseph Chetwynd carries from Belton before the week is done. I speak of grave matters, child, and the hour for

them is not yet. We must think first of Master Danvers' liberty."

Nance answered him very earnestly:

"I have three hundred pounds of fortune and my mother's jewels, Mr. Rushton. I will spend the last guinea and sell the last stone to give Master Danvers his liberty. Oh, be a friend to me — help me to-day — I have misjudged him so, and, God knows, I love him!"

Lawyer Rushton, much touched at her appeal, put his hand upon her arm very kindly.

"The Squire of Naseby shall be a free man to-night; but he must never know by whose doing, young lady. He is too good a fellow for that; his honour would refuse a woman's sacrifice. Hereafter, my care shall be so to husband his estate that the fortune he should rightly enjoy may go into his own pockets, and not into those of the rogues who fatten upon his generosity. What folly has sown, prudence shall glean for a new harvest. But do not think that a guinea of yours, or a jewel from your mother's dower, is necessary to us. I know

another way, a better way, child. Let your servants call a coach, and you shall help me with your eloquence when help may be needed."

Nance would have overwhelmed him with her protestations of gratitude when his promise was fully understood; but he would hear none of it, urging her again and again to see that a coach was fetched, and to make haste, lest Master Danvers perished of waiting. At which, all excitement now, she ran, first upstairs to tell the news to Meg, and again to the hall of the house to see that a coach was called, and back to my lord's room to be sure that it was empty; and so, at last, with lawyer Rushton at her side, she set out for the Fleet, in as great a state of flurry, delight, pity, and expectation as ever carried woman upon a work of mercy.

Chapter XVII

Wherein Lawyer Rushton would like to Spend a Guinea; and Jack of Naseby comes to his own

THEY drove apace by Charing Cross and the great houses of the Strand, eastward through Fleet-street to the bridge whereby the prison stood. Neither spoke, for each had much to think upon; the lawyer telling himself that he was carrying Nance of Belton to another; while Nance, in her turn, could blame herself again and again for the trouble that had befallen her friend. The companion of her girlhood thrown into prison for a paltry debt! Never a word to her or to those that had loved him. But a line, nay, a hint — and how gladly she would have gone to him, that together they

might have saved Belton! It was too late for that now, yet not so late that the happiness of their love might not be saved to them. Jack had been ashamed to tell his misfortune, she said, and all else had followed the shame. She pitied him with a young girl's pity, and believed that never coach went so slowly. For Jack was waiting, waiting for his liberty and the voices of his friends.

"Oh, Mr. Rushton, shall we never get there? 'T is an hour, I vow, and not by Temple Bar yet."

"A little patience and less snow, my dear, and all will be well. Your hour is no more than twenty minutes, I fear, and the New Year brings the coaches abroad. Danvers knows nothing; our haste will not be his. Remember that fortune, which comes to us with lagging steps, wins the kindlier welcome. Upon my word, I would give a guinea to know what Master Jack is doing this day."

Nance sighed and looked out again, for they were now nearing the church of St. Dunstan's-in-the-West; wherefrom they

could hear the noisy clamour of apprentices who kept holiday, and watch the gay company upon the sidewalks, and welcome the merry church bells and tell themselves that London town wore her white mantle well, and was become a city joyous and all beautiful. Even the very prisoners in the Fleet must breathe a breath of hope upon such a glad day as that, the lawyer said; and Nance took heart of it, and began to tremble a little when he pointed out to her the first houses of Fleet-street, and the bridge at the foot of it, whereby the prison stood.

"He does not know that I am in London, child," said he; "this is a day he never will forget to his life's end."

True, ay, a thousand times true. Jack Danvers' thoughts were set upon anything but such a visit when New Year's morning took him, for a little sunshine, out of his shabby room to the dismal court wherein light-hearted debtors were supposed to play the game of racquets. No New Year for him, who had made such a poor game of his life that men might point the finger

of scorn at him and say, "There goes the prisoner of the Fleet, the bankrupt, the debtor." Never again, he said in his despair, would he see little Nance of Belton, who had been all to him in his lonely world. Shame of his position, an odd countryman's shame, forbade that any word of it should reach his friends at Naseby, or those who gladly would have hastened to his help. Nance should not hear of his disgrace to her dying day, if he could help it. Enough that he had played ducks and drakes with his fortune and brought himself to this.

For nigh two months this incomprehensible obstinacy kept him a close prisoner in the Fleet. He lived during that time, as he would tell you, upon a gold watch and a pair of jewelled buttons. When money ran short, a rascally lawyer from the purlieus offered counsel, and assistance, and reading through the strange tale of debtor and creditor, and bills payable and bills due, came to the sagacious conclusion that a little good arithmetic would save

the Squire of Naseby yet. This rogue it was who wrote to Harborough to attorney Rushton there; and having written, brought that worthy man pell-mell to London town and to my lord's house. But Jack knew nothing of the visit.

He had looked for the rascally practitioner upon that New Year's Day; and when a turnkey said that visitors awaited him, he thought surely that he had not heard the fellow aright.

"Visitors — for Jack of Naseby! Ecod, they ride bad paper then, and the ditch will bring 'em down. Say I wait for my banker, Joe — nay, man, I'll groom a suspicion for my name's sake."

It was the old Jack, in truth, who spoke, though sadly changed, and not a little wan and shrunken for that which he had suffered in so gloomy a place. Jest as he might, his heart was heavy within him, and the laughter rang false and hollow because of that which it might have been for him. Sun and snow, and the glory of the frost at Tilton Wood, the music of the countryside; the holly in the homes of

the people — his own bright fireside, ah, and greater happiness than man might contemplate, little Nance, his wife, his heart's desire, to call him "husband" while God gave them life. And now — what were they saying of him at Naseby? His days were over, indeed; he was done with as a good horse that once has stumbled at a treacherous gap. He would never hold up his head again. He was as one of those of whom they said, "His future lay behind him."

Very dismally, with heavy steps, he mounted the dirty staircase and went reluctantly to his room. You can judge of his astonishment to find Lawyer Rushton there already, sitting in a high-backed chair with as much dignity and complacency as ever he had brought to "The Hollies" at Naseby. The lawyer, on his part, will tell you that the Squire stood as a statue, now looking at the door, now at his visitor. Jack vowed afterwards that he had the impulse to run away, so great was the surprise of it.

"Lawyer Rushton — ecod, man, ye take

my breath! Nay, 't is not yourself, I can't, I can't believe it!"

Hope, gratitude, the friendship of old time, how they came surging back to choke the man's voice, to warm his heart in that good hour. He had a friend yet, then; he was not forsaken! There were tears of an honest man's thankfulness in his eyes when he grasped the lawyer's hand.

"Nay, it 's another, lawyer, another — there could be no such fortune to bring friend Rushton to this place —"

"Ay, but there could be, Jack, and to many a worse place than the Fleet Prison. Why, zounds, man, you have half the quality of London here. It 's the fashion, they tell me, to sup in the Fleet when Vauxhall Gardens are too cold. You have paid your footing, and now go out to laugh at it. Come, no arguments, lad, for here are the papers, and here is Hoggart's discharge. He vows that he is put to shame for what he did, and he flung the money in Chetwynd's face at the Harborough Market on Saturday. You 're obliged to none, Jack Danvers, let me tell you. This

very day I carry the papers of your liberty to this door as I carry you away from it — to Naseby and your home."

Jack did not move a hand, they say, for very amazement when he heard the story. In truth, the tale deceived him. "To Naseby and his home." Those were the words he heard. He did not know that honest Rushton had found the hundred pounds which were flung in Chetwynd's face. He would not, dare not, believe it then.

"Nay, lawyer," said he, "my freedom ye may give me, but I'll never show my face at Naseby while I live —"

"What, because of the fashion which sends quality to sup in the Fleet! Heard man ever such nonsense! Come, how if I told you that another wished it as I wish it —"

"Another — ay, what other is there that remembers Jack of Naseby?"

"One that loved you, Jack."

"'T would be Dick Dallas, surely."

"Truly, he loves you well, but knows naught?"

"Loving arms were about his neck"

"Then Bobby Bellars it will be."

"He thinks you in London town and says you have forgotten him. You must name another."

"Dang it, lawyer, I am at the last of 'em. I go to Naseby no more — my word upon it."

"Then I shall have to call one more eloquent — zounds, I really believe she's at the door now!"

Jack turned sharply on his heel. His face was white as the snow without the prison walls. A cry of delight, of astonishment, ay, and of more than any surprise burst from his trembling lips, when Nance herself, little Nance of Belton, stood radiant before him, and held out her arms to him.

"Jack, dear Jack, we have come to take you home at last."

The little face, the face of his dreams, was pressed close to his; loving arms were about his neck; hot tears from bright eyes burned upon his cheek; Jack of Naseby had found his own that day.

Chapter XVIII

Of a new Hat, a Bachelor's Face, and the end of the Story

NOW, it was a very strange thing that though Nance knew nothing, and Master Jack was as ignorant as a babe, the groom Quick indulged in such odd behaviour at my lord's house in St. James's upon the evening of this New Year's Day, that all his fellows declared him to be mad; or, if not mad, then so greatly intoxicated that he was a disgrace alike to his mistress and to the livery he wore. For what should the fellow be seen to do at quite an early hour of night, but to throw his beaver hat upon the flags of the stable-yard, and, having thrown it, to kick at it lustily, once, twice, three times, until it was so reduced in shape and quality as to be worth no more than any old tile you

might find upon a dustheap. Nor was this the whole of the disaster, for, having demolished his hat, the merry fellow thereupon drank a great deal of porter, and persuaded the other servants likewise to drink a great deal of porter, and upon the porter, brandy, and after that so much small beer that he must run from place to place to cry a farewell, and to tell the extraordinary news that Belton Abbey was saved, and that his little mistress would never know trouble again. In all of which he betrayed an illogical mind, and presumed, as his kind will, upon those anticipations of fortune which the jade herself uses so cunningly for the undoing of the hopeful. Nor can his biographer discover any excuse for such premeditated jollity, or its outcome.

True, we shall not find fault with this good fellow, Quick, because he showed a merry face to the world, nor was it odd that those who rode away from London to Northamptonshire in a post-chaise next morning were light at heart and full of content as people who have come to happiness after much misunderstanding and

many troubles. Nance was there, for sure, and Jack, with a touch of the old colour in his cheeks, and Lawyer Rushton, a little wistful yet glad withal, because he played an honest man's part. Nor shall we overlook aforesaid Quick, who rode in the dickey, or the witty post-boys, and the stout horses, or all the cheering thoughts which the hum of wheels upon the hard frosty road, and the memories of home-coming may conjure up.

Very loth, in truth, was my lord to part with Nance — though this he did not protest before her ladyship; and "Zounds," as the attorney said, "he would have found some way to keep her, but for a pretty bit of goods he had lately seen, as gossip said, in the house of a Parliament man that had made a fortune out of India." So my lord did not but squeeze Nance's hand, and slip in a sly joke about the wedding, and bring blushes to her cheek with his talk of god-fathers and such odd fellows.

"And," said he, "ye shall find me a room at Beltoń when good fortune carries me upon that road."

This talk she could not understand, at least that part of it which named Belton as her own; for surely, she said, there could be no more thought of Belton now — nor would she deceive herself with any promises. Enough that she found Jack, the old Jack, at her side, and that she loved him dearly, and that her three hundred pounds a year of fortune, with such of Jack's estate as the lawyer could save, would give them "The Hollies," and a good home there — even horses, it might be, and the pleasures so dear to both of them. But Belton was Sir Joseph Chetwynd's from this day forth, and no act of hers could save it. She would not weep for it, she said — no, nor listen to Mister Rushton's odd quips about it, and the hints he put abroad of fortune's caprice and of her surprises. She was going home — if it were the meanest house in England that awaited her, it should be a home while Jack was there. In all of which Jack was at one with her, crying to the lawyer to cease his banter, for God's sake, and not to plague the little girl.

"We 'll do well enough at Naseby, old friend, and ecod, you shall pay the bill for a new horse apiece. Let Belton be for Belton's man. I 'll hear no more about it; no, nor see a cloud upon my little girl's face. 'T is enough for me to thank God that I have her at my side this day."

Lawyer Rushton watched them in good content, for, in truth, they sat so close together that you could not have pressed the page of a book between them, but presently he said:

"Since you name it, Jack, I must hark to you. Nevertheless there was an odd thing happened at Belton the very day I set out to London — though you 've no wish to hear it."

Nance looked up, all curious.

"At Belton, Mr. Rushton?"

"Yes, at Belton, young lady. For, what think you, a man with a nose clapped askew upon the side of his ugly face, rode away in a coach so little to the liking of your people that they cast about a thousand stones at it, and would not have done until Cottesbrook Ford was passed.

"They cast about a thousand stones at it"

Name that for an honest farewell — zounds, they would have killed the fellow had not the master of Belton come between them. As it was, Sir Joseph carries a sore skin to London, I 'm told, and the tale of a horsewhip on his shoulders — "

Nance and Jack looked one at the other. Was Lawyer Rushton dreaming it? He spoke of the master of Belton.

"Be plain with us, man," cried Jack, grown impatient; "how does the master of Belton go to the help of a fellow with a misshapen nose, if 't were not his own brother? Ecod, a pair of them I 'll be bound, and one looking north and one looking south, like signposts in a lane. Tell a story we can understand, lawyer."

Mister Rushton took snuff with some nicety.

"A long tale, Jack, better told to-morrow when we ride in," he said; "now, when a man goes to the wars, is clapped in a foreign prison, named as dead, and brought back to his own country by Providence alone, think you he can reel it off like Parson Dallas at his thirdly. 'T is not

to be done, Jack, but over a good fire, with a good glass at your elbow, and those that love you for listeners. We shall find them all at Belton to-morrow when we ride in. Until then, bide patiently, as Miss Nance means to do."

Nance, they say, had betrayed much distress while he was speaking; but now a great light of understanding came to her eyes to brighten them, and her cheeks flushed scarlet when Mister Rushton covered her little hand with his.

"Oh, Mister Rushton!" she cried very earnestly, "you do not jest with my happiness. Is it — can it be possible that you speak of brother Richard?"

"Young lady," said the lawyer, very solemnly, "I speak of God's great mercy. Your brother, that was thought to be dead in the province of Madras, rode home to Belton the very day I set out to seek you."

But Nance swooned at the news, and swooning, they carried her from the chaise to the inn at Bletchley, where they had meant to lie the night.

. . . . .

Brother Richard from the wars had come to life, indeed, and, living, had ended in the twinkling of an eye the strange tale of his father's will and of another in his father's house. Of the story of his brave adventures in Ceylon, and of the disaster which Tippoo Sahib wrought upon the English army at Tangore, you shall find a true and faithful account in the library at Belton; for there lies a great history which has no part in these pages; nor may we dwell upon it. Suffice it that Nance, her brother lacking a wife, came to Belton after all, in the very week that her cousin, Joseph Chetwynd, was driven out before the stones of those that willingly would have done him a mischief. And there may we leave her, the little Nance that we have loved, crying to her and to the man who won her heart at last, Will Shakespeare's prayer:

> God, the best maker of all marriages,
> Combine your hearts in one.

A great home-coming it was, ay, and a better day when a week had gone, and from the steeples there rang a merry peal; and

Dicky, the parson's son, was there, and Bobby Bellars, the Squire of Barton, and Nance, all radiant, to walk up the aisle of Belton's church upon her brother's arm. Even old Jacintha, forgiven for her sins, shed tears for the joy of it. Quick, the groom, had found a new hat to kick. The very troughs were full of warm spiced ale that day; there was not one so mean in all the parish that he had not some tribute for his little mistress.

And the dance that followed upon the wedding! No man might speak of that in common words, Master Dicky said, and he should know, for, by all account, he could speak no word at all when midnight struck and the bride had been bedded two full hours.

But Lawyer Rushton, mounting his cob by the lantern's light to ride to Harborough upon a frozen road, looked down at the head of George the King, and said, egad, it was an old bachelor's face, after all.